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The Honour Of The House

Mrs. Hugh Fraser
& J. I Stahlmann



1758



THE HONOUR OF THE HOUSE



THE HONOUR OF THE HOUSE

BY
MRS. HUGH FRASER
AND

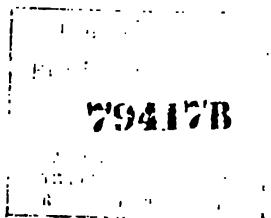
J. I. STAHLMANN

Authors of "The Golden Rose"



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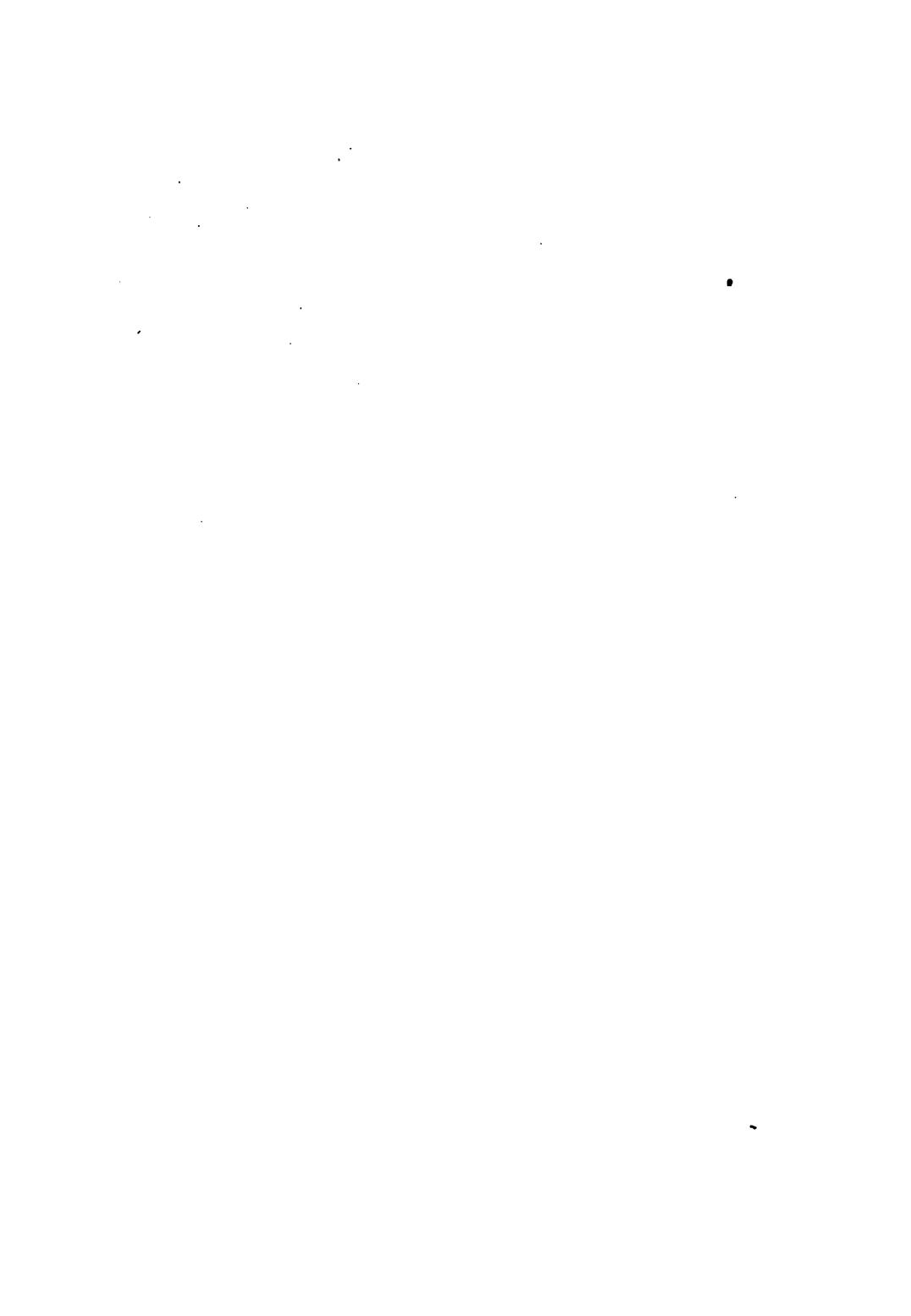
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THE HONOUR OF THE HOUSE

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CHAPTER I

ON the western bank of the Tiber, where the land rises almost sheer from the river, stands the Palazzo Bordelacqua, dominating the Leonine City and proudly facing Rome's eastern limit, the distant Esquiline. Between is spread the whole width of Rome, its palaces and churches and ruins, its deathless beauty and its dead dominion—an epitome of history, a map of the landmarks of time.

The Bordelacqua Palace, though not one of the largest, is one of the most perfect specimens of Renaissance architecture; its exterior, rich in decoration but nobly simple in design, gives no clue to its interior disposition; and the house itself, raised high above the city and screened from all near view by the massed ilexes that border the eastern terrace, gives an impression of proud indifference to vulgar praise. The gardens slope steeply down to the Via Lungara and the river's edge; through the wrought-iron gates that open on the street, the passerby beholds a series of precipitous waterfalls leaping down from the darkness of the crowning grove, over step after step of the shallow terraces, its cool way shaded by overarching greenery and guarded by statues of nymphs and Tritons set along the ladder

of the marble balustrade. Here and there the water rises in a jet of diamond spray, and in its far-reaching moisture the maidenhair fern has hung, on balustrade and pedestal, a deep, delicate fringe that catches the sun and holds the water and sways in the breeze till it looks like a stream of liquid emerald on either side of the stream of crystal. At the foot of the hill, on the level of the street, a vast marble-bordered basin gathers the rushing waters in a miniature lake, on whose ever repeated circles rock and sway the brown-and-gold trumpets of the bell-flowers which float in profusion on every Roman fountain.

No one was ever seen to linger near the little lake, or climb the stone stairways that crept up through the trees on either side of the waterfall. The whole beautiful scene was merely the outwork of an impenetrable fortress, the fortress of a Roman noble's privacy in his own domain in the year of grace 1696, the reigning monarch being our Lord the Pope Innocent the Twelfth, and Ferdinando Giovanni Maria, Prince of Bordelacqua, Duke of Sansovino, Count of Acquanera and some fourteen other Countships, one of the four "Upholders of the Throne."

The Prince went rarely abroad, the members of his household never. Though times had changed and the streets were safe and quiet enough—by day—



light—yet the habits of the great families remained much what they were centuries before, when feuds raged unchecked and hostile factions fought bloody battles every time they met; when the victors sacked and burnt their opponent's dwellings, and the women and children lived habitually in the strongest tower under the charge of a heavy guard. The origin of the jealous seclusion had long been forgotten, but the habit itself had become a matter of pride to whatever autocrat happened to be the head of the house; indeed, any departure from it was resented as a lowering of his dignity in the eyes of his equals and those of the plebeian herd. Although any display for the benefit of the latter was scornfully eliminated, yet the love of splendour and of things beautiful had found time to develop during the more peaceful periods of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and was granted full expression within the houses and private gardens of the rich as soon as they were no longer required to hold their own by the sword.

Prince Bordelacqua's immediate forebears had been among the first to take advantage of public peace to build for themselves a stately dwelling and lay out spacious pleasure grounds. Making free use of the treasures of marble which still adorned the ruins of ancient Rome, or lay, half-buried, on her forgotten quays, the Bordelacquas had erected in

their secluded domain a shining palace that seemed to face the city, but showed its real front to the West and the plain that stretches its desolate beauty from the melancholy line of the Janiculum away to Ostia and the sea.

To the West sloped the rose gardens in broad flat terraces, separated by diverging avenues walled in with box hedges, so thick and high as to dwarf a little the square-cut ilexes that mingled their foliage of green and silver in an almost impenetrable roof overhead. Between avenue and avenue, reached only by rare openings cut in the box walls, the garden architect had laid out bowers of enchanting secrecy, deep, green courts where grass and wild flowers ran riot; here too were wildernesses of roses and syringas; fountains also to linger near in the hot noonday, with marble benches warmed by the westering sun for cooler hours, and a vast maze or labyrinth of such ingenious intricacy that the children of the house had been formerly forbidden to enter it, lest they should never find their way out again. This prohibition, indeed, was no longer necessary, for the time of the young Bordelacquas was so strictly meted out that no moment of the day was left free for juvenile escapades.

Yet, on a certain morning in June, in the second year of the reign of the afore-mentioned Pontiff, Innocent XII, the gardens of Palazzo Bordelacqua

bore the appearance of having been rifled by hasty and all too-grasping hands. In the earliest flush of the dawn a furtive figure, slight but amazingly active, had several times sped down from the most southerly terrace, disappeared for a while, and reascended nimbly with armfuls of flowers to be deposited on a bench just within the side door of the chapel, whose chief entrance faced on the great rectangular courtyard round which the palace was built. The young marauder cast fearful glances around as he gathered his spoils, for he had no mind to come to a dispute with the master gardener, a big, clever man from the North, with a terribly heavy hand. It was well known in the household below stairs that Maestro Isidoro sold not only violets and lilies and aromatic herbs for his own benefit, to all who would buy them, but that a goodly part of the oranges and lemons of the estate were disposed of for the same laudable end; but since the steward, Pio Sacchetti, had either not discovered the fraud, or, for reasons of his own, refused to recognise it, no one else had the wish or the courage to cross Maestro Isidoro's wrath. His only open enemy was young Andrea, the Chaplain's acolyte, who, in his zeal for the fitting adornment of the altars placed in his charge, made raids on the flower beds at untimely hours and found full reward for dangers braved, in the approving nod of

the old Chaplain, Don Bartolomeo, on beholding the result of his disciple's labours. And to-day, of all days, the church must be resplendent, for not only Don Bartolomeo, but guests, relatives and retainers must be made to feel the immense importance of the ceremony which was about to take place there.

So it came to pass that shortly before noon on this June day, the interior of the Bordelacqua Chapel presented an aspect of beauty and freshness greatly contrasting with its usual sombre appearance. As a rule, the sun beat hotly through the dimmed yellow glass of the high windows; but these were now closed, so that his beams could do little more than warm the dust that lay on the black-and-white marble floor and capped the heads of a cloud of gilded cherubs about an incense-darkened painting above the High Altar. To-day all was swept and garnished. From the entrance up to the altar-rails the pavement showed a path thickly carpeted with the vivid green of freshly gathered box sprigs; masses of flowers decorated the altar and pushed their blossoms through the forest of wax tapers that surrounded the Tabernacle; from every possible vantage point of niche or bracket, even around the feet of the austere marble saints against the pillars, sheaves of roses and lilies, still beaded with dew, gave a moist fragrance to the rather melancholy

atmosphere of the old Sanctuary. The closed windows had, moreover, been curtained over to exclude the heat, and the place was all in pleasant dusk, like a garden at twilight. Empty too, save for the young sacristan, Andrea, who, dressed now in a long scarlet robe surmounted by a white cotta, was moving about giving the last touches to his work almost regretfully. It had been such a labour of love, and the occasion for it would never arise again, for him. The next time the eldest son of Casa Bor-delacqua should take to himself a wife, Andrea would be a middle-aged man and his place would have been more than once supplied by younger candidates.

Well, none of them would ever outdo his work of to-day, and perhaps some of the old servants then, remembering it, would wag their heads deprecatingly and say, "Ah, you should have seen what our Andrea did when Don Giacinto was married!" And, thinking of all the splendour and romance of such a wedding, Andrea, as he began to light the many candles from a thin wax taper wound round the end of a wand much longer than himself, hummed under his breath an ancient pagan love song about Cupid and Venus, a song that the young men sing even now as they wander through the Alban vineyards on September nights, gun in hand, to keep the robbers away from the ripe grapes.

It came naturally to Andrea's lips to-day, for, although he himself ventured to nurse aspirations unconnected with love or marriage, the impending ceremony appealed strongly to his imagination, and his part in the adornments for the pageant would be proudly remembered all his life.

Not only the young acolyte, but all the members of the household, except, perhaps, the Prince himself, had risen that morning with the conviction that this fifteenth of June was to witness the most notable event of their lives, nothing less than the marriage of those two noble children, Don Giacinto Bordelacqua, Duke of Sansovino, eldest son and heir of Prince Bordelacqua, and Donna Fiordelisa Trevigliano-Borghetti, the Prince's orphan niece and ward, Princess of Asti in her own right since the death of her father a twelvemonth earlier. The bridegroom was fourteen years old, the bride ten. Her mother, who had died at Donna Fiordelisa's birth, was a sister of Prince Bordelacqua, whose long-cherished ambition of uniting the properties and titles of the Trevigliano family with his own was about to be accomplished. To some of his relatives and to at least one member of his establishment this early consummation of the Prince's design was not unfraught with doubts as to its wisdom. His younger brother, Don Lorenzo, the Bishop of Viterbo, and his sister, the Abbess of the Convent of Santa Pu-

denziana, at Castel Gandolfo, had both attempted to persuade him to wait a few years longer before taking such a decisive step; and Don Bartolomeo Prinetti, as his private Chaplain and the tutor of his boys, had persistently combated it on the grounds of Don Giacinto's independent and rather rebellious character, which, though warm and generous, would be only too apt to resent bonds imposed upon him before he should have attained an age when it might at least appear as if he had been consulted. The little girl was, of course, regarded by all as merely a valuable piece of property confided to the Prince to bestow as he should see fit, the only restriction on his liberty, by her father's will in that matter, being, that she should pass a certain number of years under the tutelage of her aunt in the convent at Castel Gandolfo.

The Prince's Chaplain, like the Prince's brother and sister, had found it impossible to shake the resolution of the all-powerful head of the family, and took comfort from the fact that for at least four years to come he would be at his pupil's side and use his influence to make things run peacefully between father and son. Don Bartolomeo was reputed in Rome to be a man of consummate judgment, not only in matters that related to his calling as a cleric, but in things artistic and literary as well. His little apartment under the eaves was rich in

books and prints; he revered the great artists and writers of the past almost as he revered the Saints, and the noble connoisseurs of his day were accustomed to appeal confidently to his dictum when the authenticity of some coveted addition to their collections was in question.

His young protégé, Andrea, who served him as acolyte and sacristan, knew not which side of the Chaplain's character and attainments to admire most or copy more sedulously. At times Andrea saw himself as a holy and learned priest, ministering to some noble House, deferred to by all; at others he dreamed of art and glory—and to-day art was in the ascendant. When he had lighted all the candles he backed down the chancel steps and stood, rapturously contemplating the effect of his handiwork.

“Yes, it is well done!” he told himself. “Even Don Bartolomeo will have to admit that I am something of an artist. The arrangement of those flowers—the boldness combined with the delicacy of their grouping—is not unworthy of a master! ‘Ah!’ ”

The exclamation came under his breath as he turned his head and listened. There were sounds of muffled voices coming from beyond the padded leather curtain which during the daytime served as a door for the Chapel, dividing it from the arched carriage-way connecting the inner with the outer

courtyard of the palace. Directly opposite the entrance to the Chapel, under the high archway, was the grand staircase leading to the apartments inhabited by the Prince and his family, and the voices which had disturbed Andrea's meditations were those of the two persons privileged to enter those apartments at any time—Don Bartolomeo Prinetti and Pio Sacchetti, the steward of Casa Bordelacqua, who knew more about its affairs than even the Prince himself. It was an inherited knowledge, for the Sacchettis, from father to son, had been in the Bordelacqua service for three hundred years, noting and docketing every item of income and expenditure, knowing to an ounce what each estate should produce, and also keeping, in the vast iron-doored "cancelleria" on the ground floor, which was their domain and private office, the archives of the family—a collection of leather-bound volumes in which every event, trivial or important, was carefully entered, births, deaths and marriages, side by side with the dates and descriptions of entertainments, visits, "villeggiature," the refurbishing of a room or the engaging of a servant.

Hence Sor Pio was more effectively master in the house than the Prince himself, and those under his rule feared his displeasure as they feared nothing else on earth. Andrea, as soon as he was aware of the steward's approach, made a great show of

moving about the kneeling stools and placing them in proper order down both sides of the box-strewn aisle. A certain number were covered with grey and purple velvet—the family colours—and heavily studded with gilt nails. These he placed in rows near the chancel, for they were destined for the Prince, his family and guests, plainer ones of dark wood further down the Church being provided for his dependents. His brother, the Bishop, was to officiate at the ceremony, and for him waited a canopied chair within the rails on the gospel side, while just below the step and well in advance of the other kneeling stools were two, side by side, richly draped with crimson damask and ornamented with escutcheons: that on the right hand bearing the device of Bordelacqua, a tower upon a hill above an expanse of water; that on the left the arms of Trevigliano, a single golden fleur-de-lis on a blue ground. These were for the bride and bridegroom, Giacinto and Fiordelisa.

The clock in the Sacristy struck the quarter before twelve, and Andrea moved to repeat the signal by ringing the Chapel bell, but he lingered on the way, curious to learn what was keeping his two elders so long in conversation outside. He disliked Sacchetti on principle; the man's attitude toward Don Bartolomeo had always struck him as wanting in respect, almost hostile, indeed, and as he listened now

Andrea's face darkened, for Sacchetti was speaking, and that in no deferential tone.

"Your Reverence will quite understand my position in the matter. My instructions, no less than the long-established rules of the household, expressly forbid any serving of meals—unless in case of sickness—except at the family table and at the appointed hours. Not even the sons and daughters of the house, as you know, are exempted from this regulation."

Andrea understood, then, that the Chaplain had been trying to carry out a cherished design, long confessed to his acolyte, of having his supper sent to his own apartments, thereby to gain more time for an important piece of literary work which lay before him. As Andrea heard the steward's curt refusal he could not keep back the curse that rose to his lips. "A misfortune to him and his!" he muttered angrily. He would have said "An evil death" but for the regard due to his surroundings at that moment.

Don Bartolomeo, however, appeared to feel no resentment. "Very well," he was saying mildly, "I quite understand, Sor Pio. And now, if you will excuse me, I will go into the Chapel."

He raised the curtain and passed in, Sacchetti following him, and both men, after crossing themselves with holy water, stood for a moment in silence at the

foot of the aisle. Andrea approached and watched the Chaplain's face for signs of approval. Presently Don Bartolomeo turned to him with a smile, saying, "That is well done, my son. The combination of colouring on the altar is excellent! Is it not so, Sor Pio?"

Sacchetti gave a grudging assent, at which Andrea's cheeks flamed angrily, but the attention of all three was diverted at that moment by a tentative twanging of stringed instruments from the gallery overhead.

"The musicians are beginning to tune up," remarked the Chaplain, "and we must be making our own preparations. Is everything ready in the Sacristy, Andrea? His Lordship will be here in a minute or two now."

The Priest and his acolyte disappeared through the Sacristy door, and, left alone, Pio Sacchetti looked at Andrea's decorations sourly enough and then began to rearrange the kneeling-stools with a good deal of unnecessary noise, and grumbling, loud enough to be heard by the others. "That young idiot! Doesn't he yet know the Princess' cushion from that of the housekeeper? He ought to be punished for such stupid mistakes."

The steward's temper, never equable, was to-day strained to excusable irritability by the responsibility which devolved upon him of arranging everything

on a scale commensurate with the dignity of Casa Bordelacqua and, at the same time, avoiding the least unnecessary expense. Having settled the cushions to his liking he turned, and with a very perfunctory crook of the knee in the direction of the altar, hurried away, to behold, as he emerged from the Chapel, the wide doors at the foot of the stairway opposite being thrown open by a fair-haired page, very splendidly dressed in dove-grey satin laced with purple. He did not at once catch sight of the steward, and stood on the lowest step complacently regarding his outstretched leg stockinged in grey silk and terminating in a purple rosetted shoe.

“Eh, Sor Pio,” the boy remarked as he raised his head and brushed back the curl that had fallen across his cheek, “you will have to hurry, unless you intend to fall into place here. The procession is already forming in the *sala*. I was sent on to clear the way for it.”

The sound of heavy yet hurrying footsteps behind him arrested further speech, and he stepped hastily aside and bowed as a stout elderly man with a white face and pale blue eyes descended the last step. Sacchetti also bowed low, for this was Don Lorenzo, the Bishop of Viterbo, a great man, though a very gentle one. His costume was that of a dignitary of the Church; beside the gold cross

that was suspended from his neck hung that of an order bestowed by the Grand Duke of Tuscany, to whose court he had been accredited, some years previously, as Papal Legate. He hurried across the paved space under the archway, followed closely by his own Chaplain, and seemed so preoccupied that he almost forgot to extend his hand in order that the steward, who was now kneeling down, might kiss his ring. His Chaplain, who was carrying the Bishop's vestments in a green silk bag, uttered a smothered exclamation of impatience at the momentary delay. He had had some difficulty in getting his patron away from the room where both the Bishop and Donna Olimpia, the Abbess of Santa Pudenziana, had been making a last effort to induce Prince Bordelacqua to postpone the marriage of Giacinto and Fiordelisa; the Bishop—not for the first time—arguing, that although such juvenile unions might be allowable in certain circumstances, yet this one savoured unpleasantly of worldly and covetous motives; while the Abbess, a woman of fixed purpose and uncompromising character, boldly told the Prince that he might be seriously crossing the designs of Providence for the girl's future.

“It may be well for the boy,” she declared; “he must marry sooner or later, and you will choose his wife for him. But you are doing Fiordelisa a great injustice. You cannot prevent me from taking her

to the Convent—to stay there for seven years—her father's will provided that it should be so. If Heaven should send her the grace of a religious vocation—and I warn you that I shall do my duty by her and allow no vanities of the world to distract and occupy her mind—what then? Is Heaven to be denied and the child made miserable through life because, at ten years old, you have bound her to your son and absorbed her estates into your own? Beware, my brother, for you and yours would pay heavily for such cruelty and sacrilege!"

But her vehement protestations were wasted on the Prince. He turned aside to glance at the clock, and then, with a pitying smile, remarked to Don Lorenzo, "Even you, my revered brother, must perceive that the fault of covetousness with which our good sister reproaches me, appears at any rate to run in the family. Better that the Trevigliano estates should be cared for by myself and Giacinto than that they should go to bring distraction to holy women who have renounced the pomps of the world! And now I must relieve you of the inconvenience of my presence. Time passes and we must prepare for the ceremony."

So saying, the Prince passed out, leaving the Bishop and his sister alone.

Monsignor Don Lorenzo Bordelacqua was altogether dissatisfied with the situation in his brother's

house. Albeit juvenile marriages, such as that at which he was about to officiate, were common enough at that time in the higher nobility of Southern Europe, yet the good prelate could not help thinking that they savoured too much of worldly motives to be either commendable or prudent, even from the world's own point of view. As his sister, the Abbess, who was to take the little Fiordelisa away with her after the ceremony, in order to supervise her education during the next seven years, had already pointed out—who could yet tell whether the girl herself had the slightest vocation for the marriage state? Why interfere thus prematurely with her natural bent and the possible dispensations of Providence in her regard?

“As for me, I shall do what I consider to be my duty by her!” Donna Olimpia now declared to the Bishop. “As I told Ferdinando, I am not going to be a party to filling her head with the vanities of this world. Do not forget that, by the terms of her father's will, she is to be under my sole control from the day of her tenth birthday until she is seventeen. I have nothing to do with her property, nor would I if I could—that is all no more than so much dross, as far as I am concerned—but her spiritual welfare is my affair and mine alone. And I have no intention of neglecting it.”

Don Lorenzo regarded the Abbess for a moment

and then bowed his head in grave assent. The resolve expressed in her piercing black eyes, her dilated nostrils and set mouth awoke in his own gentle heart a passing envy of the virility and sternness of her character.

“ You never neglect your duties, my dear sister,” he said, “ and therein lies our best hope for Fiordelisa’s happiness. At present it is impossible for us to prevent Ferdinando from carrying out his wishes, but should Fiordelisa, when she is grown up, have other aspirations, there will be no difficulty in having her marriage with Giacinto annulled.”

“ I am glad to hear you say so,” the Abbess replied. “ In the case you have mentioned I shall depend upon you, dear brother, to support her plea before the Holy Father.”

“ I will not fail you, or Fiordelisa, or my duty to God,” the Bishop replied with dignity. Then, smiling at his sister’s menacing tone, he added, “ We all feel, my good Olimpia, that you should have worn the cassock and I the veil, but, since Heaven decreed otherwise, you must comfort yourself by reflecting that the same Heaven will not deny my unworthiness the grace necessary for my vocation when the time arrives. Pray for me that I may always act with courage and prudence. Will you now find our little bride and instruct her as to her conduct during the ceremony? It is time for me

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to go down to the Chapel, and here is my Chaplain come to conduct me there."

As he moved away with his companion, the Abbess' glance followed him disapprovingly. "Were *I* wearing that cassock and cross," she murmured, "this ungodly marriage would never have been in question! However—Heaven's will be done—and Heaven's will shall be done—and now I must go and find that poor child."

CHAPTER II

THE household of Prince Bordelacqua was composed of some two hundred persons, divided into ranks and occupations as rigorously as the court of a reigning sovereign. Such indeed was the head of the House, an autocrat whom none ever dreamed of disobeying and with whom only his closest relations and one or two highly privileged dependents, such as his Chaplain or his Steward, would venture to argue. Next to him, in outward importance, at least, came the Princess, a gentle, clinging creature, much younger than her husband, whose stern, silent ways had so checked her natural expansiveness that she was almost dumb in his presence; although, as he realised with bitterness, she could be gaiety itself with her children, her women, her few friends, and, above all, with her "*cavaliere servente*," Agostino De Curtis di Cortatone, whose avocation in the establishment was the most recent outcome of the changed conditions of the time. Society, as understood to-day, was of course, non-existent, but a woman of Princess Bordelacqua's rank was expected to visit periodically the wives of some other Roman potentates and to attend the rare though sumptuous entertainments given in their houses. On such oc-

casions it was considered fitting that she should be accompanied by a gentleman-in-waiting as well as by her "donna d'onore," a person who exercised the functions of a duenna for a young married woman or of lady companion to an older one. The duenna was easy to find, but for the "cavaliere servente," as her colleague was afterwards called, so many qualifications were required that, once found, he became as a rule a permanent (and most serviceable) member of the family. Gentle birth, an agreeable exterior, perfect familiarity with etiquette and with all the delicate regulations of precedent and precedence—these were the first requisites. And the fact that he was willing to fill the position at all implied the existence of the others—an amiable disposition and self-effacing temperament—since, for men of more active tastes, there was plenty of employment and emolument to be found in one fighting camp or another north of the Alps. The "cavaliere" must also be a man of education, able to write the great lady's letters and amuse her by reciting poetry and telling romances in the long leisure of her idle days; versed in music, and of reliable authority as well as taste in the matter of gems and such adornments. At the time of Giacinto Borde-lacqua's marriage with Fiordelisa Trevigliano, the institution of the "cavaliere servente" was still, so to speak, in its experimental stage, but it proved so

acceptable that in after times it became a recognised avocation, provided for in marriage contracts; the man who should exercise it having been chosen by the parents of the bride, in consultation with the bridegroom, to whom, of course, the gentleman named must be altogether *persona grata*.

If anyone ever worked hard to earn that title it was surely Agostino De Curtis, for his was no sine-cure. It was pleasant work, indeed, to entertain the Princess in her happy moments, pleasanter still to the susceptible heart of him to receive the confidences of a beautiful woman and sympathise with her in unhappy ones. But he must not play his part too well, or there would appear in Prince Bordelacqua's hard black eyes that curious film of jealousy ready to leap into anger at a tone too warm or a glance too bold. Also there was Don Giacinto to be considered, the dark-eyed, spirited eldest son, who from the very first had conceived a violent antipathy for the smiling, smooth-tongued De Curtis, an antipathy not diminished by the fact that Don Cesare, the youngest boy and the Prince's favourite, had singled him out with demonstrative affection, probably because of his delightful habit of carrying a box of sweetmeats with him wherever he went. Don Bartolomeo Prinetti was another thorn in De Curtis' bed of roses. The Chaplain's knowledge of

human nature led him to deprecate the society of a good-looking, pleasant young man for Princess Bor-delacqua, a woman still young herself, eager to gain and bestow affection, and suffering truly (though not quite as much as she imagined) from her spouse's saturnine, unresponsive nature. At times, Don Bartolomeo's grave eyes met those of Agostino De Curtis when the latter was trying to enliven some solemn family meal with gossip and story; where-upon those of the younger man would fall to his plate, his flow of words become checked half-way, and a sense of constraint seem to descend on all concerned.

Don Bartolomeo's position was, of course, un-assailable. The deference which would in any case have been accorded to his sacerdotal calling was greatly increased by the strength and honesty of his character and by his complete detachment from all worldly motives. The Prince, who sometimes opposed him—on principle, as it were, to reassure his own opinion of himself—had to admit to his own heart that he was afraid of the Chaplain's courteous reproofs, administered frankly when the head of the House had been betrayed into some act of injustice or expression of rancour. Once or twice he had been tempted to solicit advancement for the gentle priest, in order to fill his place with a more yielding, less critical ecclesiastic; but Don Bartolo-

meo's influence over the two boys, as well as over the rest of the immense household, was so excellent and so sustaining to the Prince's own authority that as yet Ferdinando Bordelacqua had feared to part with his services. The only person who ventured to adopt a hostile attitude towards the Chaplain was the steward, or "*maestro di casa*," Pio Sacchetti; but then Sor Pio was a cantankerous creature, more or less hostile to all mankind, and only servile towards the Prince, to whom no one except Giacinto ever dreamed of bringing any complaint against him. Such complaint would have been very coldly received; Pio Sacchetti was the only really indispensable person in his master's world, and his unscrupulous obedience to any and every command from that quarter constituted a valuable make-weight against Don Bartolomeo's delicacy of conscience, where, as often happened, it was necessary to count with both men in family matters. If the Mohammedan axiom be correct in asserting that every man is attended through life by a good and a bad angel, the Chaplain and the steward certainly filled those callings toward Prince Bordelacqua, the one constantly rousing his conscience, the other as sedulously soothing it to sleep for his own ends; and the fact that Don Bartolomeo ranked with the family, while Sacchetti was only the first of the great army of employés or domestics, and, in consequence, sat below

the salt, in no way lessened the great strength of his position in the establishment.

All who could claim any connection with that establishment had presented themselves at the palace on the morning of Giacinto's wedding, and, while the priests were making their preparations in the Sacristy were beginning to take their places in the Chapel. Several of Prince Bordelacqua's pages, the comrades of him who had addressed the steward so carelessly in the courtyard, were preparing to take part, with Andrea, as acolytes in the Marriage Mass, for which Don Bartolomeo was to act as "ceremoniere" or master of ceremonies. At his issuing from the Sacristy, fully vested, the boys desisted from their whispered chatter and formed themselves into a decorous procession. As Don Bartolomeo took his place behind them the opening notes of the music announced the approach of the chief actors in the great function. The Chapel doors were now standing wide open, forming the frame to a burst of midday light and colour outside, so dazzling as to make the interior seem dark to those who entered it.

The first to do so was Salvatore Gozzoli, the captain of Prince Bordelacqua's guard of halberdiers. The greater part of these were drawn up in the courtyard, but two, in gala uniform of grey and purple, with morions and breastplates of

burnished brass, followed their leader into the Church and posted themselves, with a sharp rattle of grounding pikes on either side of the southern door. The captain, a dark, athletic Lombard, advanced to the marble Altar rails, at the extreme end of which, opposite the Sacristy, he took his stand.

Scarcely had he done so when the narrow doorway of the Chapel was filled by a succession of people who filed through it in pairs, past the stolid halberdiers and into the nearest seats, where they stood motionless, their eyes straight before them and their hands folded. These were the personal attendants of the Prince and his family, valets, ladies' maids and nurses. They were followed by others who took the seats in front of them, a number of men in the sombre professional clothes of citizens; these wore no swords, and were the "clients" of Prince Bordelacqua, the men of business who looked after his affairs, lawyers, bailiffs and rent collectors. Among them was the steward, Pio Sacchetti.

After a short interval, came another man, all alone and dressed in the height of fashion. This was the "cavaliere servente" De Curtis. He carried a cushion, a prayer-book and a small jewelled pouncet-box which emitted a strong, musky perfume. The scent-box and prayer-book he deposited on the edge of one of the large kneeling-chairs in front of

the rest; the cushion he arranged in the chair itself and then retired to a seat on the opposite side of the aisle, where the gentlemen of the family were accustomed to sit.

In appearance De Curtis was of medium height and slim, but faultlessly built. Not a movement or gesture of him but conveyed the impression of hidden strength beneath a kind of feline grace and nicety of calculation. He was darker even than most Romans, and his eyes were extraordinarily soft and black, with heavy lashes, so that his enemies among themselves called him the "Zingaro." By this they meant that he looked like one of the gipsy dancing-girls who sometimes found their way from the North to Rome and were allowed to dance in honour of certain feasts of the Church. But they were careful to avoid offending him to his face. As a retainer of Prince Bordelacqua's, he was entitled to his patron's protection; his patron's displeasure few would have wished to incur.

There was silence in the Chapel for a few minutes; and then came a further rattle of pikes on the marble by the doorway, and the musicians in the gallery began to play a gay marching air as the most excellent Prince and his family entered and walked in solemn procession up the box-strewn aisle. At the first notes of the music all present had risen to their feet and those farthest from the centre were stand-

ing on tiptoe or craning their necks to get a sight of the illustrious personages.

Of the Prince it was often said, with some justice, that nobody but he could ever have had so many distinguished enemies. It was notorious that even the kindly Pontiff, himself, had manifested irritation at Prince Bordelacqua's conduct in the absolutism with which he ruled his family and dependents; not to mention his attitude towards the Pope's own government and his ministers. A tall, rather weather-beaten man with sloe-black eyes, like Giacinto's, and iron-grey hair, his most prominent features were his delicately curved nose and an immensely high, full forehead, which, added to his close-set mouth and long heavy chin, invested him with a certain appearance of asceticism well in keeping with his reputation for severity. Also, as he affected none but black clothes, his appearance was suggestive rather of Spain than of Italy. In this, as in certain details of his costume, as, for instance, the unusually long sword with basin-guard and cross-hilt that he wore, his heredity was apparent; his mother had been a Spaniard and he had early fallen under her influence and that of her relative, the Spanish Ambassador to the Court of Pope Alexander VIII. His wife, born a Pandolfi, and his junior by more than twenty years, was a native of the Marches, a handsome, rather vacuous-looking woman with a

mouth too small for her face and very high, arched eyebrows that seemed to be asking a perpetual question.

The Prince, in his costume of a Grandee of Spain, and wearing the Order of the Golden Fleece, headed the procession, leading the Princess by the hand up to the first seat below the Altar rail. There, after genuflecting, they parted, he turning to the left and she to the right, where she sank down on her emblazoned kneeling-stool, her hands clasped and her eyes fixed upon the Altar. She made a pretty picture with the lights playing softly on her fair hair and the pearls entwined in it; on her delicate jewelled fingers and robe of stiff red silk striped with white and gold. A little tremour of her fingers only betrayed her consciousness that her husband's rhadamantine glance was upon her, a fact not lost on De Curtis, who, though behind the Prince, found it prudent to become deeply absorbed in his prayers.

The public had forgotten those three already, for the young bridegroom and his brother, resplendent in white and gold, their heads held high and their cheeks flushed with excitement, followed their parents and took their places, Giacinto on the kneeling stool prepared for him, and Cesare close to his father. Fine, well-grown lads were these young patricians, though so unlike that few at first sight would have taken them for brothers. Giacinto had

his father's strong aquiline features, and hair which curled black and close about his forehead; his eyes had the velvety brilliance of sloes after rain and his proud mouth could look scornful sometimes—notably when his glance rested on De Curtis, his habitual antipathy for whom had grown now to contempt and hatred through the teachings of his one hero, Captain Salvatore Gozzoli. Giacinto's bearing had, at all times, a dignity far beyond his years and recalled that of his father, who was the only person he feared—as only the children of such a man as Prince Bordelacqua could fear. Cesare, two years younger, had inherited his mother's blue eyes, fair hair and caressing ways, and was, perhaps on that account—for the Prince loved his wife with all his jealous soul—his father's favourite.

After the entrance of the two boys an interruption occurred in the procession, and Prince Bordelacqua turned his head sharply as if to ask what was the matter. The crowd behind him intercepted his view; otherwise he would have seen his sister, the Abbess, who was leading Fiordelisa, unceremoniously separated from her charge at the entrance of the Chapel, by a handsome young woman in peasant's costume. This was the child's nurse, Teresinella, who had suddenly darted forward and now began to rearrange the little girl's curls, which the wind in the courtyard had rudely blown into her

eyes. Under the arm furthest from her aunt Fiordelisa had contrived to bring into the Chapel her most cherished treasure, a tiny, battered doll. The only person who had so far noticed the doll's presence was the halberdier at the door, but he had not for a moment allowed the fact to interfere with the stolid gravity of his salute in which he had included the doll with its owner, his future liege-lady, Donna Fiordelisa Trevigliano.

Teresinella coaxed the toy away from her, murmuring, "Love of my soul, care of my heart, just let Teresinella put your hair straight! The *Signora Abbatessa*"—here came a pause filled by a private malediction—"would let you be married all in disorder, would she? What does *she* know, my beautiful, about taking care of you? And yet, she is going to take you away from me! There, there, don't cry," for Fiordelisa had flung her arms around the nurse's neck and her little chest was heaving ominously, "I will not leave you—I will come too—now, be good and take her hand and you shall have all the sugar-plums you like, afterwards."

The child straightened herself and dutifully turned to her aunt, who had appeared anything but pleased at the delay. Slipping her hand into that of the Abbess, Fiordelisa walked sedately up the aisle, where every head was turned to gaze at the small slender figure, close laced in a gown of silver

brocade heavily embroidered with seed-pearls, her golden hair flowing down from under a tiny crimson cap and shading the large brown eyes where some big tears were resolutely kept from falling. The contrast between the tall, pale Abbess, in her black robes, and the little rose of womanhood she was leading, produced a sensation of chill in the beholders; but this passed when Fiordelisa took her place on the kneeling-stool beside Giacinto, and the boy, in sight of the whole assembly, turned and greeted her with the radiant smile he kept for her alone.

She smiled back, all her trouble vanished in his beloved companionship; and then, remembering where she was, she clasped her hands and began to say her prayers. The sun had climbed to the zenith now and through a window high up in the dome suddenly shot a broad shaft of gold down on the two children—gold that floated over their heads and lit up their splendid costumes, sparkling in the hilt of Giacinto's rapier and making an aureole in Fiordelisa's hair. Beyond them the tapers starred the darkness of the Altar; all around, even from between the chancel rails, the crowded sweetness of Andrea's lilies and roses hedged them in, and a sigh of pleasure rose from all hearts there at the lovely sight.

Far down in her place among the servants, Tresinella, the Venetian nurse, clenched her hands and thus charged Heaven with her commands, "*Domine*

Dio," she muttered, " if they are not good to her—if anything happens to my little angel there—I will kill them all—slowly—no, suddenly—so that their souls may go straight to Hell! It is understood, eh! And I shall not mind going there, too, if I may only see them suffer!"

The long High Mass was over at last; Giacinto had given Fiordelisa the broad gold and silver pieces—almost too heavy for the childish palm—had placed on her finger the marriage ring, and had watched the Abbess at once transfer it to a golden chain which she clasped around the bride's neck, there to hang till the small finger should have grown to its size. To both children the Bishop's address on their future duties had come as in a trance; for they were weary with kneeling and wanted to jump up and run into the open air. Fiordelisa, indeed, had fallen asleep for a moment and woke with a start from the cruel dream which had come to her so often since her father died. In that dream she was sitting once more on his knee in her home in the Veneto; his arms were round her, he was calling her his flower, his baby, his darling, while she nestled against his shoulder and pretended to pull his golden curly beard. It was but a year since she had lost him, and in every lonely moment the pang was with

her still, a sense of irremediable desolation, rendered the harder to bear by the growing homesickness for her father's house and her father's people.

When Prince Bordelacqua had come and had taken her away with him to Rome, it had seemed to her as if a stifling, black veil had fallen upon her, the only ray of light being afforded by the companionship of Teresinella, the devoted nurse, who, with the astuteness of her race and class, had assumed airs of humility and piety so commendable in the new master's eyes that he had consented to keep her in Fiordelisa's service, in spite of his desire to Romanise the child till she should forget all about her Northern home, the great castle with its broad domains which, from the moment of his brother-in-law's death, he had resolved to incorporate with his own estates. This design had appeared the more easy of accomplishment by reason of the affection with which the little heiress inspired Giacinto as soon as she became a member of the family. Giacinto's was not an affectionate nature, though for his mother, indeed, he had real love, albeit of a somewhat pitying kind. It was incomprehensible to him that she should take pleasure in the society of such a man as De Curtis, a creature, in Giacinto's eyes, beneath contempt; that she should be influenced by him in a thousand matters and take his advice in great ones; yet the boy was sensible of his mother's

love for him and grateful for the predilection she had always shown towards him as compared with Cesare, the universal favourite. Until Fiordelisa's coming the only person who had a real place in Giacinto's heart was Salvatore Gozzoli, the captain of the guard, to whom had been intrusted the charge of teaching the young princes the arts of fencing and swordsmanship. Since these most necessary exercises occupied some hours of every day, Captain Gozzoli had ample opportunity for instilling his own views into Giacinto's receptive mind, and for furthering his own advancement with the future head of the House. Eagerly, yet patiently, he looked forward to the day when Don Giacinto should replace his terrible father, and the faithful Gozzoli should become his right-hand man.

For, like most men of his race and day, Gozzoli was a born conspirator. All his ambitions hung upon Giacinto and Giacinto's favour when he should come into his kingdom. From his present master, Prince Bordelacqua, Gozzoli knew that he could look for nothing but the rigorous exaction of the services due from a retainer, who was little better than a slave, to a master who held absolute power of life and death in his own dominions. The captain of halberdiers would have been but a sorry guide for Giacinto's lonely, haughty spirit had not Don Bartolomeo been his tutor. The Captain's

rough views of life, his outspoken scorn of De Curtis, his connivance at Giacinto's secret rebellions against his father—might have led the boy far astray but for the Chaplain's unceasing vigilance and wise admonitions. The saving element which Don Bartolomeo perceived in the boy's rather stubborn character was his innate honesty and love of fair play, qualities which, unfortunately, roused him to fury at certain injustices in his father's conduct towards him.

But, when Fiordelisa came into the family, a new power took hold of Giacinto. From the moment he saw her, his heart went out to his little cousin, and the loving gratitude with which she returned his affection filled him with a joy and warmth he had never experienced before. To Fiordelisa he was always tender and unselfish; her least caprice was his law, her pleasure his highest reward. Very soon his whole being was bound up in her, and he would devote all his spare time to amusing her, instead of joining with his brother Cesare and the troop of pages in their sports within the gardens at Rome, or in the grounds of his father's vast country-house of Acquanera in the Sabine hills.

Only a month before the wedding, Prince Borde-lacqua, in the presence of Messer Domenico Bra, the family lawyer, had informed Giacinto that Fiordelisa was to become his wife. Only then did the boy

understand the meaning of the process which had been taking place in himself. On hearing the words he had turned white, then scarlet. His father, watching him curiously, had laughed and had said something in an undertone to the lawyer, who had laughed too, as in duty bound, and Giacinto, longing to be alone with his beautiful discovery, had been all too glad to avail himself of the Prince's permission to retire.

Small wonder that, to Giacinto, his wedding-day was the proudest and gayest of all his young life. As he issued from the Chapel, leading Fiordelisa by the hand, they were greeted by a storm of "Evvivas!" from the crowd in the courtyard. Giacinto acknowledged the plaudits with courtly bows, but Fiordelisa hung her head in sudden shyness at the publicity. The boy bent toward her, whispering, "Fiordelisa, little bride of my soul, will you not give me one smile?"

She forgot her shyness, forgot her awe of Aunt Olimpia, who was close behind her, and looked up into the ardent young face now all protective tenderness. Then, indeed, she smiled, with eyes and lips, the utter confidence she felt in him irradiating the winsome face of her, and the hand that he was holding grasped his more tightly; she raised her head and walked proudly, as if to try and attain something of his height. Even the Prince, emerging be-

hind them from the dusky Chapel, whence strains of music and the perfumes of incense floated still, felt a thrill of pleasure quite unconnected with personal motives, as he noted the regal bearing of the boy, the delicate beauty and dignity of the girl-bride.

“Oh, Papa,” said Cesare, jumping forward and catching at his hand, “please find me a wife, directly, just like Fiordelisa ! ”

The Princess, on the other side of her husband, laughed outright at this sally, and Ferdinando Bordelacqua was betrayed into joining in her merriment. His heart was light to-day.

“All in good time, my son,” he replied. “If you are a very good boy, perhaps I will let you choose her yourself. Now, walk properly, these people are looking at you.”

They were now passing under the colonnade that ran around the courtyard and were approaching the main stairway of the palace. Fiordelisa gave a little cry of delight as she took in the appearance of the great square enclosure, transformed into a scene of surprising beauty. From every window depended one of the long crimson silk hangings provided for such festivities; the grey stone wall was almost concealed by them, while from window to window hung garlands, of fruit—pears and oranges and pomegranates—set in wreaths of flowering bay, in deep loops thick in the middle and tapering deli-

cately at either end, where they were fastened by love-knots of gold ribbon that fluttered in the sunshine—such garlands as Raphael had in mind when he decorated the Vatican “*Loggie*”—such as every Roman gardener loves to weave to this day.

The expanse of the great “*cortile*” itself—empty because the sun had driven the crowd of spectators into the shadow afforded by the colonnade—was one vast carpet of coats-of-arms, the armorial bearings of Casa Bordelacqua and the families related to it worked out in a dazzling embroidery of flower petals reproducing the heraldic colours. This ancient art of the “*infiorata*” was always carried out by certain experts, and they had been at work since dawn, filling in the complicated designs with masses of white and scarlet, blue and yellow, purple and green, so evenly and thickly laid that, but for the heavily perfumed air and the floating of a petal here and there in the midday breeze that was coming up from the sea, no one could have discerned that the carpet was not one vast woven tapestry rolled out upon the stone. Only up the centre was there a straight undecorated way leading from the stables in the inner courtyard to the front entrance of the palace. It was thickly covered with fine gold-coloured sand brought in from the tufa excavations of the Campagna, and looked like a bar sinister of splendid dross, laid sharp and heavy across the

flowered escutcheons of Bordelacqua and Treviglano.

Fiordelisa's wondering gaze followed the golden road to its ending and then she shivered, though an unwilling fascination held her eyes to the man who rode sentry there, in the entrance-way of the palace, motionless as a statue, on a great coal-black horse that pawed the yellow dust and tossed its head angrily as if trying to shake off the control of the steel-gloved hand that never stirred for all the jingle of shaken bridle and gilded bit. The rider was a heavily built, red-faced man, in cuirass and jackboots. He had a light moustache brushed up till it nearly met his eyes that peered out coldly from under the brim of his iron hat. This was Anton Stürmli, a Swiss, the second in command of Prince Bordelacqua's men-at-arms, a fine servant and a fearless soldier, but detested in the guardroom for his overbearing ways and his foreign birth. To Fiordelisa he was always an object of fear; the other troopers had ever a pleasant word for the little lady whom they saluted so respectfully; but Stürmli would only draw that huge broadsword of his and hold it up straight as she passed him—a mark of respect too terrifying to be agreeable—with never a relaxing of the born scowl on his brow, no softening of the hard look in his eyes.

As hers rested on him now, a sense of disquiet took

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possession of her, and she was glad when a gentle pressure of Giacinto's hand drew her attention to the fact that they had reached the lowest of the crimson carpeted steps up which they must pass to reach the banqueting hall above.

CHAPTER III

THE Prince and his family had withdrawn to the private apartments, in order to give their guests time to take their places in the great hall where the wedding feast was prepared. All were guests to-day, although no friends of the Prince's own rank had been invited. The crowd that flocked up the grand staircase at a signal from the steward consisted of persons who were all, in one capacity or another, the great man's dependents; but all, from the lawyer, the physician, the librarian, down to the peasants who had walked in from the Sabine estate the day before, were there as guests to enjoy the Prince's hospitality and to receive each one the gift and place which were his exact due.

For many, especially, of the country people, it was the first time that they had ever seen the interior of the palace, and Pio Sacchetti had some trouble to get them past the great canopied throne in the anteroom of the hall. They gathered round it in a crowd, staring at the gaudy heraldry of its heavy embroideries, appraising in whispers the matted gold of the deep fringes hanging from the canopy, and asking one another whether the most excellent Prince were about to take his place there.

“There?” exclaimed Sacchetti as he caught the question. “Not to-day, let us hope, for your sakes! That is where the Most High Excellency sits to give judgment on malefactors.”

A shiver ran through his hearers at the ominous words and in a moment the space round the throne was cleared. The steward laughed drily.

“Better keep away from it, eh?” he remarked. “Come, there is something pleasanter to behold in the *sala*.” And he led the way into the hall beyond, where the pages were waiting to marshal the guests to their seats.

The “sala,” indeed, presented a beautiful sight. It occupied almost the whole of the first story of the palace, its great windows, eight on either side, looking east over Rome and west over the private gardens whence came, on this June morning, the hum of bees, the musical tinkle of fountains, and a thousand fragrances floating on the sun-heated air like honeyed incense, warm and pure, so that all who breathed it felt full of pleasant confidence. Two long tables ran down the sides of the hall, loaded with marvellous dishes, peacocks in their own jewelled plumage, swans made of blanched almonds with necklaces of sugar-plums, hares moulded in sweet chestnut paste, an equestrian group sculptured in butter; and, on the Prince’s table which ran across a raised dais at the upper end of the hall, the

Bordelacqua tower, three feet high, all built of sugar and spices, rising out of a great gold vessel full of amber-coloured wine supposed to represent the sea. Silver and gold gleamed everywhere, the superbly chased salt cellars, marking the different degrees of the guests, rising prominently at various intervals. At least two hundred seats had been provided in the body of the hall, and at each seat was laid a gift as a memorial of the great event; for the upper class of guests a ring or a brooch or one of the little silver-gilt clasps then in fashion for men's hats; for the servants and peasants the present took the ever welcome shape of a broad silver coin.

A hum of pleasure filled the hall as the people found their places and stood each behind his allotted seat, waiting for the entrance of the great ones, whose arrival was heralded by a burst of music. And then, two pages, bowing low, held back the curtains which masked the side door near the daïs, for the Prince and the Bishop to enter together, followed by the Princess and Donna Olimpia, Giacinto and Fiordelisa, Cesare and De Curtis, the latter surreptitiously looking at himself in a pocket-mirror and smoothing the locks which had been ruffled by contact with the curtain. All looked grave, as Don Lorenzo pronounced the blessing, and then the elders sat down, the children standing dutifully until the Prince indicated that they might do the same.

At first the meal was not a gay one at the upper table. The Prince, intent solely—now that his great aim, the marriage of his eldest son to Fiordelisa, had been achieved—upon the re-establishment of his importance as the central figure of his small world, had relapsed into his usual sombre taciturnity. Somewhat to the general discomfort, this reversion of Prince Bordelacqua to his normal self; even De Curtis, who had armed himself with a collection of new jests for the occasion, found it almost beyond him to cope with the atmosphere of constraint which now descended upon the company with this disconcerting change in his patron's humour.

For some time past, Prince Bordelacqua's humour, as the result of a number of domestic irritations, had in general been anything but certain, and these irritations, insignificant enough on the surface, had more than once of late threatened to break in a storm upon the heads of several persons, notably the Princess and De Curtis himself on the one hand, and of Don Giacinto and Salvatore Gozzoli on the other.

Even now, as he played his part of entertainer at the high table, the "cavaliere servente" was sensible of an occasional blackness of terror in his heart when he thought of what must happen should the Prince ever divine the dread secret of that heart and of another; the heart of the woman

who was eating and drinking so prettily at her husband's elbow—Donna Giulia Pandolfi, Princess Bordelacqua.

There is no need to enter into all the intricacies of the stages by which Princess Bordelacqua and De Curtis had arrived at the pass in which they found themselves by the day of Don Giacinto's marriage to Donna Fiordelisa. For years, perhaps, unconsciously—consciously, perhaps, only for months or even weeks—both had known that it must come to one of two things—separation or disaster. To both their natures—equally starved of romantic love, as it seemed to them, by force of circumstances, and for so long dependent on each other for just that daily and hourly suggestion of it, without which existence was intolerable to either—the situation could have no other outcome. One or both must eventually fly from the shelter of *Casa Bordelacqua*. As yet they had done no wrong, either by word or deed; not so much as a breath of spoken treason to the Prince had passed between them. But, by now, they dared not, even when alone, look one another in the eyes lest the hidden thing should spring to life between them and impel them whither they were afraid to think; much less would they have exchanged glances beneath the eyes of Prince Bordelacqua. So that, although each knew only too surely what was in the other's mind, they could only watch the end

approaching in dumb, half-rapturous, half-shameful, acquiescence.

In the case of another woman than the Princess, the maternal love of her children might have made her take measures to stave off the temptation; but, with her, there was little of such an inducement to lift a finger to save herself, so doubtful was she whether she wanted to be saved at all. Her eldest son, Giacinto, in spite of his fondness for her, had always been too like his father in many ways to compensate his mother for being Prince Bordelacqua's wife. And with Cesare, the younger, she had never been allowed to come into any very close contact. Cesare was the one weakness of the Prince, who had, as it were, appropriated the boy from the beginning and had steadfastly repulsed any attempt of Donna Giulia's to obtain a share of her son's really genuine affection for his father.

In very truth, it would have been a miracle had Princess Bordelacqua been other than what she was, a woman so disappointed with her life hitherto, that not even the considerations of her religion could reconcile her to giving up her unspoken love for the one human creature who loved her in return.

Not that De Curtis' love was likely, as she had sometimes let herself go to thinking, to be either of the most unselfish or elevated kind, or he would have already removed himself from her vicinity. But,

still, it was love—and that was all she craved. And when, as had happened on several occasions of late, Prince Bordelacqua had caught her watching the “cavaliere servente” furtively—in her longing to make sure of the strength of her own temptation—or when she had kept him waiting for the response to some remark or other before she could detach her thoughts from De Curtis sufficiently to reply, her husband had never failed to show his resentment towards them both.

Even if the Prince himself was as yet some way removed from recognising the fact, nevertheless the seeds of suspicion had been implanted in his mind; sooner or later their poison was bound to do its frightful work. At present he was like a man in the first stages of some insidious disease who does not know what is the matter with him, but feels that something is wrong; so he is discontented and uneasy and is ready to betray his vague uneasiness upon the slightest pretext.

Suddenly though—as suddenly as he had felt called upon to re-assert it—Prince Bordelacqua recovered all his habitual assurance as to himself and his family, including De Curtis. His authority seemed to him to have triumphed sufficiently over all obstacles in the marriage of Giacinto and he felt

he could really well afford to show some indulgence towards those subjected to his government by Providence.

Overhearing the Bishop ask for water with his wine, he leaned across his wife and remonstrated with him gaily.

“Come, brother, this is not a day for spoiling good liquor,” he laughed. “You cannot refuse to drink the young people’s health with me in a cup of Falernian—no, positively, I insist.”

And he ordered the page behind him to fill his own, the Prince’s silver-gilt beaker, and to offer it to Don Lorenzo.

The Bishop accepted it, as in brotherhood bound, and sipped a little of the wine, after which he returned it to the page, who brought it back to the owner, indicating with the corner of a napkin the exact place on the brim where the priest’s lips had hallowed it, in order that the Prince might drink from the same spot. The cup was then handed to Princess Bordelacqua, whose face went first scarlet and then deadly white as she drank from it with an involuntary glance in De Curtis’ direction, before passing it on to Donna Olimpia.

The Abbess, merely touching the edge of it to her mouth in a kiss of charity, presented it to Fiordelisa, who had to use both hands to raise the massive cup that hid her eyes while she swallowed a few drops

of its contents before replacing it on the table. It was then borne round to Giacinto.

“In filial and marital duty and thankfulness”—Don Bartolomeo began to prompt him in whispered Latin, seeing that he had quite forgotten the formula customary upon such occasions in Casa Bordelacqua.

“In filial and marital duty and thankfulness, I submit myself to the benignity of God and of your Highness,” said the boy, addressing his father, who responded also in Latin with the *Quorum benedictio*:

“Whose blessing be on you now and forever.”

“Amen,” said Giacinto, tasting the wine and offering it to his brother with the rest of the set formula:

“Mayest thou, in thy day and at the pleasure of Heaven and this our father, partake with me in this blessing. Amen.”

To which Cesare, also prompted by Don Bartolomeo, gave due answer, receiving the beaker from his senior:

“So that we may thereby be indissolubly united in the bonds of filial and fraternal love!”

“Amen,” said Prince Bordelacqua, not without a hint of returning parental severity; and with that the family ceremony was ended.

All this time the Bishop of Anagni was thinking of certain confidences that had passed between Don Bartolomeo and himself during a brief interview

earlier in the day. For Don Bartolomeo had unburdened himself freely to the Bishop in regard both to the question of Prince Bordelacqua's unsatisfactory relations with his eldest son, and to the boy's own turbulent and intractable character, which, as he had made evident to Don Lorenzo, was the prime factor in the situation.

Don Bartolomeo had kept back nothing of his misgivings from the prelate.

“Your Lordship had better know the whole truth,” he had said, as soon as they were alone together after the ceremony in the Chapel. “Don Giacinto Bordelacqua is very much his father’s son—and that being so, it follows that there are often difficulties between them. Not a day that passes, but Don Giacinto becomes more headstrong, more intractable—and so they work upon each other to the destruction of all harmony. The Prince—speaking with respect—is not the man to forgive easily an injury to his dignity. But that, of course, your Lordship knows as well as I do.”

The Bishop had nodded sorrowfully, in reply; and Don Bartolomeo had pursued:

“It is not for me to suggest a remedy for this state of things. There are too many causes at work in the case for anyone without far more influence than I have to be able to combat it. All I can do is to preserve peace as well as I can—to excuse Don

Giacinto to his father, and to try to prevent him from angering Prince Bordelacqua by his want of respect for the Prince's commands. Also, I pray for them both—after all, that may be the best I can do for them."

It had needed some patience on Don Lorenzo's part to elicit the central facts. And these seemed little enough to act upon. Giacinto's fascination by Gozzoli and the example of Gozzoli's contempt for De Curtis; together with the mutiny of Giacinto's attitude toward his mother on De Curtis' account, and the latter's covert and often ill-concealed antipathy for both Giacinto and Gozzoli in return, and, supremely, Giacinto's increasingly frequent and public attempts, by various means, to belittle his father's authority over him.

"True," reflected Don Lorenzo, "the removal of Salvatore Gozzoli might possibly begin to work some improvement in the case"; but as he could not disguise from himself, the real roots of the trouble lay far deeper than that—in the characters of Prince Bordelacqua himself and Giacinto. And here he felt almost powerless to do any good, seeing how far apart from theirs his life was passed in the old Episcopal palace of sleepy Anagni.

Don Lorenzo was still pondering the problem, then, when his brother invited him to join with him and with his family in the drinking from the loving-

cup. When all had tasted of it and Prince Bordelacqua had drained it to the dregs, he gave orders for the music, and then settled himself comfortably in his chair. Gradually the clatter of talk and merriment died down on all hands as the first sigh of violins—pitched in the low, almost harsh key of those days—began to steal out from behind a screen of foliage at the lower end of the hall.

This was the signal for the bride and bridegroom to rise unwillingly from their places and leave the dais by opposite ends. Going down into the space between it and the long tables, they came round and faced one another, Giacinto with a bow and Fiordelisa with a low curtsey, in the first steps of a formal dance, a “pavane,” the forerunner of the modern minuet.

As the sunbeams fell upon Fiordelisa’s gravely inclining, diminutive form in its stiff white satin dress, even Donna Olimpia’s stern face became wreathed in smiles; all those seated at the high table, with two exceptions, were watching the child dancing, in delight at her innocent loveliness; the Prince, himself, clapped his hands in applause and turned with an exclamation to his wife: “Superb! A dream! Never have I——” but here he broke off abruptly. For the lady’s eyes had been fixed on De Curtis, who was keeping his own on the table

before him. Those of Prince Bordelacqua now turned from black to agate.

“ May I ask——” he began again coldly, to his wife, but relapsed into a displeased silence, as the Princess lowered her gaze, with some perfunctory excuse, to where Fiordelisa and Giacinto were gliding through the evolutions of the “ pavane.” As they danced, the motes of sunlight seemed to drape them with a veil of cobweb gilding, beneath which, in rhythmical obedience to the music, they passed to and fro and back and forth, now fast, now slow, their figures slightly dimmed as by a rain of gold dust.

For the first time that day, Giacinto was unconscious of anyone and anything else besides Fiordelisa. He could hardly believe yet that Fiordelisa was now his wife, his very own; it was more than he could understand, how it had all come about. Never had he known any living thing so pretty as she or so trustful of himself. No one had ever been so sensitive of his affection or had treasured it so jealously, as did Fiordelisa, in whose eyes he always felt himself to be a different Giacinto altogether from what he was in those of the rest of the world. Somehow, when they were alone together, he always felt a kind of gentleness and good will towards all creation; even De Curtis would then seem deserving rather of pity in some respects than of hatred.

And when he remembered that he must soon be parted from her for a period of years, Giacinto experienced a new feeling of terror of himself and of the long darkness before him. He was really frightened for an instant, and nearly made a mistake in his dancing, but was saved from it by Fiordelisa, who took his hand with a quick breath of dismay and guided him aright. Her large brown eyes were bright with excitement at her own skill, as she brought him face to face with the company on the daïs, and then sank down in a final curtsey to her partner. The "pavane" was over, and, at last she might wander away somewhere for a space with the lad, her husband, until it should be time for Donna Olimpia to carry her off in the coach to the convent at Castel Gandolfo.

Having received permission to withdraw, the children left the hall by a side door that brought them into a deserted gallery open to the weather and running round the entire square—as it were, an upper colonnade. At the end of it was an open door framing a glimpse of sky and trees, and from the door a flight of steps led down into the gardens.

Both Fiordelisa and Giacinto were afraid to look at one another as they ran along the gallery and out through the door on to a railed platform at the

head of the steps. They were both thinking of the same thing—of how short was the time until their parting—and neither knew how to put what they were thinking into words.

Instinctively, as they stood there, in doubt for a moment on the platform, their hands met; Fiordelisa gulped back a sob and Giacinto straightened himself, looking over her head at a black-green wall of cypress beyond. Suddenly, he bent down and laid his cheek mutely to hers, as though to seek for solace; and Fiordelisa's fingers stole up to stroke his face.

"We shall sometimes see one another, you know," she said by way of comforting him. "Aunt Olimpia will bring me over, perhaps, to Acquanera of a summer, or here, to Rome, in the winters. Do you not think so, Giacinto?"

"I do not know—but no, I do not think she will," answered Giacinto despondently. "You see, Aunt Olimpia does not like leaving the convent. And I am sure she will never let you out of her sight even for a day. Therefore she will keep you close beside her at Castel Gandolfo. As for me, of course, I shall not be allowed to go near the place! And so——"

He paused, while Fiordelisa considered the prospect thus placed before her with increased apprehension. Somehow, her very dumbness now touched

him more than anything else had done ever since he had first known her. He felt ashamed of himself for not encouraging her instead of adding to her sadness by putting matters in so gloomy a light.

“After all, though, it will not be forever,” he pursued more manfully. “Only a few years—and what is that? By then you will be a grown-up young lady and will wear your hair in the French fashion, I dare say, and have high-heeled shoes and a long train—”

At this picture of herself, Fiordelisa clapped her hands and broke into a delighted laugh.

“And I shall be able to put patches, too, on my face, like those that Donna Laura Colonna and Donna Ortensia Mazzarin had on when they came to see Aunt Giulia the other day,” she cried. “Patches as big as *scudi*, cut into shapes—moons and stars and a coach and horses and a ship! Oh, think of it, Giacinto! ”

“Yes, and wasn’t papa cross that day, too! ” returned Giacinto. “Do you remember how he frowned at them and would not speak a word? For myself,” he concluded, “I think I shall have a moustache turned up just under my nose, like Gozzoli’s.”

Going down the steps, they struck into a path leading between the cypress trees to where a fountain was playing in a gravelled space. They halted to watch the goldfish swimming in the basin, and

Fiordelisa pointed to the reflection of her face and Giacinto's on the outer edge of the water. So close together were the two faces once more, that when Fiordelisa turned her head in following the movements of the fish, her cheek touched that of Giacinto. But neither stirred to draw further apart; for some seconds they stayed quite still, and then Giacinto kissed Fiordelisa shyly and whispered:

“ You will always love me—better than anyone in all the world—will you not, Fiordelisa? ”

“ Yes—always,” she gave back, and kissed him in return. After that first bridal kiss they were both silent again for a while, until Fiordelisa repeated, almost passionately:

“ Always, always! And I do not want anyone else to kiss me, ever again, except you—and Teresinella, of course. You love Teresinella, too, just a little bit, do you not, Giacinto? ” she asked almost anxiously.

Teresinella Paluda, the widow of one of Prince Treviglano's peasants in Lombardy, had been Fiordelisa's “ *balia*,” or wet-nurse and then her nurse until now, when the child was about to enter upon a new phase of life under the care of her aunt the Abbess;—as the one living link in Rome with the past and her own beloved home in the North. Teresinella was a part of Fiordelisa's self. When the child had learned from Donna Olimpia that the nurse was thenceforth to be separated from her, it had seemed

to Fiordelisa as though something were dead in her and she had cried long and bitterly, but all to no avail.

“Of course, I love Teresinella, too,” said Gia-cinto. “That is, I love her as much as she loves me,” he added laughingly, because he did not believe that Teresinella was overfond of him.

He was about to say more, but checked himself for fear of wounding Fiordelisa, who was looking at him rather reproachfully. Taking her hand in silence, he drew her to him and together they walked on towards the further part of the gardens. Here was a marble seat upon a mound whence they could look out over the vineyards and the rolling plain between Rome and the Tyrrhenian Sea; also, they could enjoy, undisturbed in this retreat, a quantity of contraband sweetmeats, the gift of her nurse, which Fiordelisa had contrived to keep hidden from the eyes of Donna Olimpia, albeit not without difficulty and some qualms of conscience.

CHAPTER IV

“READY? Then—now!” cried Salvatore Gozzoli, lunging with his foil upon his pupil. “Tut-tut! Too slow again. Don Giacinto—had we been in earnest, you would be in need of a priest by this time!” as the point of his weapon pressed against Giacinto’s body just below the lad’s right elbow.

“But it is you who play too fast, Gozzoli,” Giacinto protested ruefully. “I could have sworn that I had you that time—even now I cannot see how you escaped me.”

“Let us try it once more,” said the other smilingly. “You are quite sure, though, that you understand the idea of it? That is most important, for everything depends upon it. See,” throwing himself again into position, “you shall be the attacker, Don Giacinto, and I will remain on the defensive. I begin to lure you on by appearing to expose myself—thus——”

And so they fell to again, the guardroom ringing to the stamp of their feet as they fenced, whilst a few halberdiers looked on critically from the long benches set against the wall as well as from the doors at either end of it, before each of which one of their number was standing on duty.

It was a morning of midsummer, a year after Giacinto's marriage; and he was taking his daily lesson in fencing from Captain Gozzoli, by whom he had, by now, been promoted to actual fighting practice. The windows of the guardroom were open and there was just enough breeze to ruffle the combatants' shirts that hung, loosened at the neck, from their shoulders. In accordance with his plan, Gozzoli's foil kept on shifting from right to left, parrying Giacinto's passes at him with consummate ease, but now appearing to expose his right side more and more to his opponent; and then, at last, when the point of Gozzoli's elbow was almost on a level with the center of his chest, Giacinto thrust at him with all his force. At the same time the hilt of the Captain's foil sank upon his pupil's blade and curved it away from him, while his point slipped like lightning over Giacinto's hilt and struck him fair over the heart.

"You see, there is no escaping it," the Captain said triumphantly. "If you never knew anything else of sword-play, Don Giacinto, you could always be sure of killing your man with Gozzoli's *stoccata!*"

For, although, of course, the invention of this particular thrust was not Gozzoli's at all, yet he felt himself entitled to the credit of introducing it into the practice of Casa Bordelacqua.

"By Heavens! I will master it yet!" cried Gia-

cinto in vexation at his own want of skill and at the subdued merriment of the onlookers who, as professional men of the sword, considered themselves perfectly at liberty to express their opinion upon the ability or otherwise of any man, even their young master, where it was a question of swordsmanship.

“Surely, you will master it, Don Giacinto; only it is not so simple as it looks—the Captain is a slippery customer,” laughed one of them. “Rest yourself, though, a little, take time to breathe, and you will spit him like a quail!”

“You speak the truth, Michele,” said Gozzoli. “With a few minutes’ rest for his arm, I have no doubt Don Giacinto will make me take a dose of my own medicine.”

So they stood there a while talking, the Captain and his pupil, out in the middle of the wide floor, Gozzoli with his back turned to the entrance doors that were open to the great stairway leading up from below, and Giacinto facing him.

Suddenly, footfalls were audible emanating from the courtyard; whereupon, the men-at-arms rose from the benches and came grudgingly to attention, for the day was sultry and they knew that it was no one of any special consideration who was approaching.

Only Giacinto and Gozzoli took no notice of anything, but continued their conversation unheeding of

what was going on around them. For with the footsteps were mingled voices; and the voices were only those of the family doctor, and of Signor De Curtis who had fetched him to prescribe for Don Cesare Bordelacqua, who was confined to his room with a touch of malaria.

As he came in, accompanied by a grave-looking young man dressed in black with a very deep white collar, the "cavaliere servente" took in the situation at a glance. He saw at once that Giacinto meant to ignore him and that Gozzoli had no intention of breaking off his talk with Giacinto on account of the newcomers, to whose presence the captain of halberdiers showed his indifference clearly by keeping his back turned towards them—although he might afterwards plead the respect due from him to the eldest son of the House, as an excuse for doing so.

So enraging was the impression of studied insult upon De Curtis, that, as he passed by the two in the middle of the room, he was unable to resist venting his anger in the ear of the demure physician.

"I must apologize, Sir Doctor, for the manners of Casa Bordelacqua," he muttered. "But, as you see for yourself, its courtesies are those of the barrack and the kennel."

It was fortunate that Gozzoli either did not overhear the words, or else failed to understand the reference to himself contained in them, or there

might have been murder done. Giacinto, however, both heard and perfectly understood, and as he did so, the smouldering fires of his hatred of the "cavaliere servente" broke into flame.

Wheeling upon De Curtis, he flung after him a single epithet; an epithet so outrageous that even Gozzoli paled on hearing it, and turned his head away quickly so as not to see the "cavaliere servente's" face receive the brutal slap of it.

"*Leccapiatti!*" called out Giacinto to his foe, which is to say "Lick-plate"—in reference to the position held by De Curtis in Prince Bordelacqua's household.

At that deadly insult there came a sudden breathlessness over everyone in the immense, sunny guardroom; nothing stirred at all, except the eyes of the motionless halberdiers, which turned from the face of Giacinto to that of De Curtis, and then fixed their gaze upon the open windows beyond.

As the word struck him from behind, the "cavaliere servente" had thrown up a hand to his head as if in sudden pain from a blow; then he stood quite still for an instant, before coming round and confronting Giacinto, who was surveying him with satisfaction not unmixed with curiosity—satisfaction at having so effectually wounded him, and curiosity as to what he would do under the smart of it. The young doctor, in the meanwhile, was gazing, scan-

dalized and almost incredulous, at the now smiling Giacinto.

“ May I inquire to whom you addressed yourself, sir? ” De Curtis asked of Giacinto at last.

“ To you, of course,” replied Giacinto. “ I do not know of anyone else in this house to whom the name could refer.”

At this, silence fell again on the place while Giacinto and De Curtis looked one another in the eyes during a space that seemed, to the doctor, at all events, an eternity. It ended with the “ cavaliere servente’s ” turning abruptly on his heel and leaving the room, followed by his companion. The door by which they went, however, was not that leading towards the bedroom where Don Cesare lay, but that which led to Prince Bordelacqua’s library. Seeing which, Captain Gozzoli whispered to Giacinto :

“ Brace yourself, my Don Giacinto—for there is going to be a storm! I fancy he has gone to tell the Most High Excellency! ”

They were not kept long in suspense; in less than a minute the door was thrown open, so that it flew back against the wall, and Princess Bordelacqua swept in, her husband, De Curtis and the doctor in her wake. She had chanced to be talking to the Prince in regard to some details of the arrangements for the forthcoming yearly summer visit of the family to Acquanera, and so had heard the “ cava-

liere servente's" story from his own lips. She was dressed in a loose morning-robe of black taffetas, in contrast with which her face looked deathly white, and her eyes were ablaze with unwonted anger. In one hand she carried a fan, which she held stiffly like a sword, while her other hand was clenched at her side; as she came up to where Giacinto was standing, her husband stood still a few feet behind her, as though curious to watch this unaccustomed exhibition of feeling on his wife's part.

"What is this that Signor De Curtis tells?" She panted in a transport of indignation, her words falling over each other so that they were scarcely articulate. "That you have dared to insult him—to insult my own gentleman in my own house?"

And without waiting for Giacinto's answer, she struck him with her fan, in his face, once and yet again; so that two red bars showed from eye to chin against the pallour of his cheek.

As the blows fell upon him, Giacinto recoiled instinctively a pace, throwing up his right hand, which still grasped the foil, to defend himself; the gesture was a perfectly natural one, but Prince Bordelacqua, mistaking its motive, sprang forward to interpose himself between the Princess and her son.

"Scoundrel! Would you dare to attack your own mother then?" he cried, snatching the foil away and flinging it to a distance, where it fell with a

crash upon the stone floor. "Ask her pardon—and mine—and that of Signor De Curtis for your insolence to him! Do you hear what I say?"

"I had no intention of attacking my mother," returned Giacinto sullenly. "As to Signor De Curtis, he has only his own impertinence to thank if I called him what I did. What did he mean by saying that the manners of Casa Bordelacqua were those of the barrack and the kennel? Let him answer that—if he can."

"My remark was intended solely to apply to yourself, Don Giacinto," De Curtis explained smoothly. "And, I may add, was called forth by your rudeness and that of this person"—indicating Gozzoli with a motion of the head—"in deliberately turning your backs on the doctor here and myself when we entered the guardroom. That is all I have to say."

Giacinto was about to attempt some further justification when the Prince interrupted him harshly:

"Enough—enough, I say! Ask pardon—and humbly—for your crimes! Rebel and would-be matricide"—taking the boy by the shoulders and forcing him, helpless, to his knees; for Prince Bordelacqua was still a far stronger man of his hands than Giacinto would be for yet some years to come.

But Giacinto's spirit was not yet broken sufficiently to allow of his complying tamely with this command;

and he sought to release himself by trying to push the Prince away from him.

“No, no—I will not! I will not—I have done no wrong!” he protested, beating with his hands against his father’s chest. “You have no right to ask it—it is an injustice, and I will not submit to it—no, never, never!”

Strangely enough, Prince Bordelacqua did not appear in the slightest degree ruffled by his son’s defiance of him.

“Very well, then,” he said, speaking almost tenderly as he stood over Giacinto with his hands on the boy’s shoulders. “Take your choice—either you will at once confess your transgression and ask for mercy, or else——” And he broke off significantly.

In the pause that ensued, Giacinto, looking into his father’s eyes, caught sight there of a purpose he had never seen in them before; a purpose so relentlessly cruel as to scare him into obedience; and, before he well knew what he was saying, he found himself stammering a formal apology.

When it was over and Prince Bordelacqua had released him, he rose uncertainly to his feet and staggered over to the nearest window, sick and faint with rage and shame; there to remain, leaning against the wall with his face averted from the gaze of the men-at-arms, the while his father poured out his

wrath in a torrent of invective upon Salvatore Gozoli, ending by dismissing from his service.

“ And think yourself fortunate that I do not have you whipped first. Go to my steward for your wages, and then take yourself off ! ” Prince Bordelacqua concluded, which said, he addressed himself now to Giacinto.

“ As for you, you will spend the summer at Acquanera, in writing out the first three books, in Greek, of the *Odyssey*, ” he ordered, “ at the rate of three pages a day. That will teach you not to keep me waiting in future, for your obedience.”

Whilst this scene was taking place between her husband and Giacinto, Princess Bordelacqua had looked on in a kind of stupor; until, as the Prince, in moving to leave the room, came near, his hand extended to lead her back to the library, she turned swiftly away from his approach and passed out alone.

During the rest of that day Prince Bordelacqua did not show himself again to his family. Not until the evening meal, which was served at ten o’clock, did he make his appearance in their midst; and that with a manner which betrayed no memory of the morning’s calamitous episode; so that the “ cavaliere servente ” was inclined to feel a little disappointed,

notwithstanding the recent public vindication of his honour.

Nevertheless, the intervening hours had been spent by the Prince in anything but a peaceful frame of mind. So soon as his interrupted interview with the Princess had been brought to a close—as had happened almost immediately after their return to his library, he had shut and locked the door behind her and had surrendered himself to the darkest thoughts. Seen from his point of view, the situation in his household was one so intolerable as to call for some instant, efficacious and permanent remedy—be that remedy whatever it might prove to be on mature consideration. And as he paced the floor of the shadowy room—for the shutters were closed to keep out the strong sunlight—he groaned aloud in travail of soul and mind.

“ Ah, the pity of it—the monstrous pity of it—to think how different it might have been, had only Cesare been the elder and his brother the younger of them! As it is”—and he threw out his arms to the warm gloom in a gesture of utter despair—“ my eldest son, the heir of Casa Bordelacqua, is become a thorn in the flesh of his own father—an enemy to me under my own roof. For my poor Giacinto hates me—I may not disguise it from myself—as he hates all authority, whether of God or man. Was ever a human being placed in a more cruel predicament

than I? What am I to do? What does my duty—my duty towards myself as well as towards those for whose government I shall one day be called to account—demand of me? Since it obviously demands something. Meanwhile, let me not forget the judgment of Heaven upon Elias for neglecting to correct his sons. May I be granted grace and strength to do aright!" and he fell upon his knees, his head bowed and his hands clasped in prayer.

Suddenly he rose, overmastered anew by returning rage at the thought of Giacinto's resistance to him; for the boy's open rebellion had been but the culmination of long years of thinly veiled defiance, as Prince Bordelacqua now realised. And, as his agitation increased, he strode up and down the half-darkened room, with something of the gait of a caged animal, his body swinging lithely, as he walked with downcast eyes and tightly compressed lips in his tormenting perplexity.

The only case that suggested itself as offering any parallel to his own was one with which the civilised world had rung more than a century earlier—the case of King Philip the Second of Spain, and his son the Infante, Don Carlos. And as the Prince pondered that story of a royal father—who had always been his model—and of that father's son, the very pattern of Giacinto, a slight palsy seized him and shook him at thought of a possible further likeness

between King Philip's circumstances and his own. He was naturally no stranger to the real facts in regard to the case of Don Carlos—the dishonest story of the latter's having been put to death by his father's orders is of comparatively recent invention—but now they seemed to point to a peculiarly frightful conclusion. At the time of Don Carlos' imprisonment, Spanish public opinion had given it as its verdict that his father had been compelled to seclude him by the discovery of his mental derangement; and, as it happened, a close relative of Prince Bordelacqua's—an uncle on his mother's side—had died insane, some years before this story opens, at Torre d'Alba, in Aragon. Hence, he found himself confronted by a fearful temptation—the temptation to presume that Giacinto, like Don Carlos, was not in his right mind. And the power of the temptation was the more irresistible because it so exactly fitted in with Prince Bordelacqua's own inclinations; here was, indeed, the lever he needed with which to remove the obstacle from his path!

And yet the idea frightened him so that he put it away from him at first; he would reflect earnestly and pray over it for a while, he told himself, when, doubtless, Providence would vouchsafe him a light upon the matter. At the same time, he was conscious of an unspeakable thankfulness; if only he could once bring himself to really believe what he wanted,

for all his fright of it, to believe—namely, that Giacinto was insane—there would be no great difficulty in dealing with the unhappy lad. In fact, he was already thinking of the exact place in which poor Giacinto, with, say, Don Bartolomeo Prinetti as his companion, might lead a sequestered but sheltered existence in spite of his infirmity;—a certain fortified farm-house among the wooded hills, a few miles from Acquanera. The only question was that of Fiordelisa, whose marriage with Giacinto would, of course, have to be annulled, later on; and then she would marry Cesare and so no harm would have been done. Even if the little girl were to grieve at first, at being separated forever from Giacinto, well, a few months would see her accustomed to the change; indeed, thought Prince Bordelacqua, it might be prudent to begin to prepare her mind for something of the sort as soon as possible.

“See what comes of overhaste,” he reproved himself. “If I had only given heed to Lorenzo’s and Olimpia’s words, a year ago, how much unhappiness I might have spared myself—and others, too, I fear—seeing what may have to be done!”

But he was in no hurry to take any further steps in the matter just yet; and so gave himself up, for the rest of that day, to reading and to reflection in his pleasant, dusky room with its bookshelves, its yellow marble busts of Roman emperors and its all-pervad-

ing atmosphere of scholar-like repose. Nevertheless, his self-communing resulted in no exact solution of the problem which faced him, that of satisfying his conscience of the absolute necessity for putting away Giacinto on purely medical grounds and on those alone. And that night found the Prince still unsettled in mind, although outwardly calm and free from all trace of resentment against his eldest son for the morning's outbreak against his authority.

As for Giacinto, although he still evinced some traces of sulkiness in his bearing towards his parents and De Curtis, yet, on the whole, he appeared—as it occurred to his father—to be not without a passing sense of compunction for his recent wrongdoing.

Don Bartolomeo put down the book he was holding, a well-thumbed copy of the "Philippics" on the table before him, and took off his horn-rimmed spectacles with a sigh.

"Eh, my Don Giacinto—one sees easily that your thoughts are not fixed, to-day, upon the Chersonese and King Philip," he said. "But you are feeling the heat a little, I dare say; certainly it is unusually warm for this time of year. Let us rest a while, and then perhaps we shall do better with our Greek."

It was late of an afternoon a few days after the scene in the guardroom, and Giacinto was sitting with the Chaplain in the latter's study at the top of one of the four squat turrets of Palazzo Bordelacqua. The room was a fair-sized one and carefully darkened by reed blinds to keep it as cool as possible; but, even so, the air of it was close and drowsy with the smell of old books and hot masonry.

As Don Bartolomeo had remarked, his pupil's thoughts were far from Demosthenes. Giacinto was thinking, instead, of many other things—of a pool of water in a sunless wood; of the mysterious allurement of the Campagna, its far, blue green borderland dimmed by a shroud of heat-mist; of the stillness of a summer's dusk among the grassy Alban hills all redolent of wild thyme and the perfumed nap of millions of distant ripening grapes. And, most especially, he was thinking of a slender girl with fair hair and brown eyes, who, he knew, was thinking of him in the convent garden, most likely, at Castel Gandolfo.

"I am sorry to be so stupid," he said. "I do not know how it is, but I cannot work well in the summer. I want to be out of doors all day—it seems such a waste of time to be shut up in the house when one might be riding about the country at Acquanera or swimming in the lake. "*Oimè*," he wound up, "when I am my own master—speaking

with respect—I will never look at a book again, Don Bartolomeo *mio!*”

The priest smiled and began to polish his spectacles with an old glove.

“Who knows?” he answered. “Perhaps there may come a day when you will be thankful for the poor books and their company—they give so much and ask so little in return.”

But he did not insist on the continuation of the lesson. He had been young himself, once; and he could sympathise with the yearnings of youth for physical liberty and for the spacious freedom of Nature. At that moment there was wafted in through the window an extraordinary sweetness from a clump of magnolias in the garden below; as it was borne to him across the darkened room, Don Bartolomeo seemed to himself to be a boy again, of just such an afternoon, fifty years earlier, and in just such another room at the top of the Collegio Romano.

Laying his spectacles on the table, he rose and proceeded to move about, as though for the sake of exercise, Giacinto following his movements with a glance almost of compassion for his elder’s inability to see things from his point of view.

And then, quite unexpectedly, the boy’s thoughts reverted to the battle of words between De Curtis and himself in the guardroom some days before, and an ugly scowl took the place of the smile on his face.

As has been seen, the battle had ended disastrously for Giacinto, with his own total discomfiture and Gozzoli's dismissal from the service of Casa Bordelacqua. Gozzoli's wages had been paid him on the spot by Pio Sacchetti, and now his post was filled by the Swiss, Stürmli. Giacinto had lost his staunchest ally, while something told him, too, that the new captain of the halberdiers, far from being a friend, was even hostile to him on Gozzoli's account; for the two men, as Giacinto knew, had long been at daggers drawn between themselves, through Stürmli's jealousy of Giacinto's fondness for Gozzoli. Of late years, too, the Swiss had assumed the part of being Prince Bordelacqua's man, and that of no one else—his model that of a sheep-dog, subjected only to its master and unsafe for other people even to approach.

Giacinto had now reviewed the recent unpleasantness once more as far as the point where his father had compelled him to ask pardon of the "cavaliere servente," when he was interrupted by Don Bartolomeo.

"Shall we take a breath of air in the garden?" the priest invited him. "I think it will do us both good. How does it strike you, Don Giacinto?"

At this Giacinto sprang lightly to his feet and reached Don Bartolomeo's hat down from a nail on the wall.

"I was wrong," he confessed with boyish roguery. "I thought you did not understand my wanting to be out of doors. But you do. And so I accuse myself of rash judgment."

Don Bartolomeo took the hat and thanked him gravely. Then he said: "My son, if what I am told be correct, you have been guilty of something far more serious than that, of late. I mean, in your behaviour towards your father when he had occasion to reprove you the other day in the guardroom. Can it be true that you actually refused at first to obey him—and that, as I am given to understand, with expressions of anger? Giacinto, tell me—is this true?"

Since learning of the scene in the guardroom, Don Bartolomeo had purposely allowed some time to elapse before questioning Giacinto on the subject; he had acted thus in order to give the culprit a space in which to see the folly and reprehensibility of his conduct for himself. Truth to tell, Don Bartolomeo felt very uneasy about the whole business; it seemed to him still incomplete in some dreadful way and that the end of it was not yet in sight. From the instant that he had heard of it, he had been depressed with a sense of foreboding that was unlike anything he had ever known before. And instead of growing less, this foreboding had only become heavier with the passing of the hours. It had its

source in the thought of all the mutual bitterness and murderous uncharity that, as he could not help but recognise, had been stirred up afresh to their depths, between Prince Bordelacqua and his eldest son, by Giacinto's conduct.

Indeed, the priest felt as though he could hardly continue to live under the same roof with so much ill-will, without endangering the serenity of his own soul. But he had no intention of retreating tamely from the struggle.

“Giacinto—is it true?” he repeated as they left the room and emerged upon the stairs.

For Giacinto was staring straight before him, without speaking, his face very hard and dull with a kind of cruel stupidity that made him look so many years older and so exactly like his father that Don Bartolomeo almost started as he caught sight of it.

“For the love of Heaven, do not look like that!” he exclaimed. “What is the matter with you, Don Giacinto?”

At last Giacinto's lips opened again and he answered:

“What can I say? Of course it is true that I refused at first to beg pardon of De Curtis; and if I did say things I ought not to have said to my father, can you wonder at it? To have to apologise to a creature like the *cavaliere servente*—in front of my own men-at-arms? I, Don Giacinto of the

Princes Bordelacqua—it is not to be tolerated. If my father did not take pleasure in humiliating me—as everyone knows that he does——”

“Hush! Be silent, Giacinto—remember what is due from you in speaking of him, or I must not listen to you,” Don Bartolomeo admonished him quickly.

The lad’s face, although he held his tongue obediently enough, retained its mask of insensate pride; but he kept it turned slightly away from his companion, in deference to Don Bartolomeo’s priesthood.

Presently, the latter stopped short, and, turning to Giacinto with a gesture of supplication, laid a hand upon his shoulder. They had come to a doorway between two deserted drawing-rooms on the “piano nobile,” the floor of the palace inhabited by the Prince and his family—the danger zone, so to speak, of Casa Bordelacqua—and, before venturing further, Don Bartolomeo felt impelled to attempt to exorcise the devil that had taken possession of his pupil.

“Listen to me, my dear,” he said. “I have a kindness to ask of you. It is a great kindness, and a very difficult one, but I put my trust in your generous heart, Giacinto, and in your affection for musty old Don Bartolomeo——”

The response to this appeal was instantaneous.

At once a certain luminous whiteness—as it were a superficial transparency like that of alabaster—seemed to glow through the earthy hue which had previously crept into the young face in the tide of Giacinto's fury.

Bending, he took his gentle old friend's disengaged hand and raised it impulsively to his lips.

“Don Bartolomeo *mio!*” he murmered, and the other continued:

“It is this: That you will make me a present of the humiliation you suffered, that I may offer it to God. It is very precious and I covet it for Him. And if you do not give it to me, you will waste it—and so no one will be any the better for it.”

“I do not know what you mean,” Giacinto gave back; but this was not true, because he knew that Don Bartolomeo meant he should renounce his anger at his father and De Curtis, thus advancing himself spiritually by the sacrifice.

“No?” said the priest quietly. “Think again.” And he waited patiently.

But, when Giacinto found himself weakening, he turned away his head once more and drew several short, rapid breaths. He felt that he desired with all his heart to give pleasure to Don Bartolomeo, but that something was trying hard to thwart his desire by usurping his own authority over himself.

It was just this interior sense of opposition to his will that won the victory.

“*Abrenuntio*,” he said quickly, using the Latin expression that came naturally to his lips under the circumstances. “I renounce my anger, then, if you wish it, and the humiliation is yours. I will try not to spoil the gift.”

Scarcely had he uttered the words, when a door was opened in a corner of the room and Prince Bordelacqua himself crossed the threshold. He was dressed as for a stroll in the garden, his head covered with an immensely wide straw hat; the hat was black, like the rest of his costume, and on one arm he carried a black cloak to put over his shoulders at sunset. In his hand he had a long walking-stick of ebony with which he tapped on the floor once or twice, as he stood still, surveying his son and Don Bartolomeo. They had not met since the midday meal, when Prince Bordelacqua had continued to show himself noticeably conciliatory towards Giacinto, whose punishment of copying the *Odyssey* he had signified his intention of remitting.

During the greater part of the last forty-eight hours, Prince Bordelacqua had been meditating more or less continuously the adoption of measures by which to restore the discipline of his household, so long imperilled by internal dissensions. Gozzoli’s dismissal had certainly cleared the air considerably;

but the Prince felt that something else would be necessary besides this, if he meant to carry out his project; although what, exactly, he did not choose to know. What he did know, however, was that he might need the force of public opinion in his favour at any moment, and that, come what might, the world at large must be led to think and speak of him as a just man and a kind, and one sorely tried by his domestic troubles. Thus, he was losing no chance of showing himself in the most sympathetic of characters, as the Christian head of a noble family.

It occurred to him that he might advantage himself considerably by a few confidences to his Chaplain, and he inclined his head graciously in answer to Don Bartolomeo's bow and that of Giacinto.

"I am going to walk in the garden for a while," he announced. "We will walk together. But where is Don Cesare?"

"He has gone back to lie down again in his room," said Don Bartolomeo. "I sent him, because he seemed to me to be still a little feverish. At his age one feels the heat."

"To be sure. Well, a few days more, now, and we shall all go to Acquanera. How, do you think—are we going to get the rain in time to swell the grapes, this year?"

"Oh, but surely, your Highness!" Don Bartolomeo was rather surprised at such an odd question,

seeing that the grape harvest was yet more than two months distant, in the first week of September. "It will fall as usual, I trust, on or about the feast of my patron saint."

"Of course—on or about the feast of San Bartolomeo," the Prince echoed absently, and relapsed into silence, while Giacinto ran on in front to open a door into the upper colonnade which gave access to the grounds. When his father and Don Bartolomeo had passed through in the direction of the further door at the head of the stairway, Giacinto halted an instant before following them.

Bringing the hand with which he had opened the door, close to his face, he sniffed at it, and then dropped it again to his side with a stifled execration; his fingers, as well as the handle of the door, had an unmistakable taint of oil of bergamot, the favourite perfume of Signor De Curtis. Giacinto felt all his hatred of the "*cavaliere servente*" revived by that whiff of scent; but, remembering his promise of renouncing his anger, he put it away from him.

And with that, there came to him an inspiration. He knew that De Curtis must have passed that way a little earlier and was probably somewhere in the garden. The chances were, thought Giacinto, that he would find him reading to the Princess in their usual retreat, in the heart of the maze, at the extreme western limit of the flower gardens.

"Yes," he decided, "for once I will try to be really generous. Don Bartolomeo will be pleased when I can tell him that I have gone out of my way to make friends with my enemy. It is not going to be easy,"—with a grimace of distaste. "De Curtis will not understand—he will think I am afraid of him. All the same, I would like to feel that I had the courage to do it."

Going out by the door at the end of the colonnade, he ran down the steps to where Prince Bordelacqua and the Chaplain were standing in the pathway.

"You may leave us for a while, Giacinto," said the former. "I wish to be alone with Don Bartolomeo during a quarter of an hour. Only remember that I forbid you to pick any of the apricots, as you did yesterday, or there will soon be none left. There, be off with you."

Prince Bordelacqua, too, had had a sudden inspiration. When Giacinto was out of hearing, but yet in sight, he pointed to him with his stick and asked:

"Does he make good progress with his books, that one?"

Don Bartolomeo, to whom the truth was dear, could only reply to this question in the negative.

"No," he confessed, "I am sorry to say that Don Giacinto has not done himself justice lately. He

seems unable to concentrate his attention for any length of time upon his task. But, doubtless, there is some perfectly natural cause to account for it—his health, for instance. It seems to me he may have overgrown his strength somewhat."

"His health?" The Prince was so astonished at the coincidence of Don Bartolomeo's words with his own thoughts, that he almost betrayed himself by his eagerness. It seemed to him that the priest had perceived what was in his mind and had anticipated it. "His health?" he repeated. "Do you speak of his—his mental health, Don Bartolomeo?"

"Heaven forbid! Oh, no, indeed—such an idea could never even suggest itself to me! Don Giacinto is in perfect mental health. All I meant to say was that, perhaps, he has more need of open air and exercise just now, than of Latin and Greek. He is growing so very fast, that——"

"Ah, and yet, do you know of late the conviction has forced itself upon me—strictly between ourselves—that there is something wrong, something very seriously amiss, with my poor Giacinto. I cannot bring myself to believe that he is entirely answerable for all the things he does and says. Ah, but I entreat you to bear with me. The time has come when I must open my heart—so have compassion on me, my friend, and help me with your counsel!"

Prince Bordelacqua was resting both his hands on his stick as he said this; his head was bowed, too, upon his chest, so that his face was concealed from Don Bartolomeo by the brim of his hat.

The Chaplain himself was so shocked by the unmistakable significance of what he had just heard, that for some seconds he could only gaze, speechless, at the black form before him.

At last he contrived to speak.

“Signor Principe, you cannot mean that you think Giacinto’s sanity is in question?” he said in a very low and tremulous voice.

The Prince raised his head and looked at Don Bartolomeo—as though he were reckoning with what he had to say.

“That is it,” he replied, after a short pause. “Forgive me if I have alarmed you, but I am in a terrible situation and I want your help. But, first of all, let me take you into my confidence. This is no surprise to me. For years I have been dreading the appearance—either in myself or my family—of some such symptoms as I seem to see in Giacinto. To us Romans there is a certain shame in having to confess the fact of madness in one’s family—but the truth must be told. An uncle of my mother’s had to be placed under restraint once, many years ago, at Torre d’Alba in Spain. Ever since then—but you

can understand how it is that I feel as I do in the matter?"

He was really so agitated that the sweat had broken out upon his forehead and his voice was shaking audibly.

But, to the old Chaplain, the notion of Giacinto's being mentally deranged was too preposterous to admit of acceptance for a moment.

"I assure you that you are mistaken," he returned with something almost of asperity in his tone. "Put the thought away from you. Dismiss it from your mind, once for all. It is nothing but a temptation of the Adversary's."

The Prince, however, pursued rapidly:

"Ah, it is easy for you to tell me that, Don Bartolomeo! Now tell me this: What other interpretation can I put upon my eldest son's habitual ill-will—not only towards myself, but towards his mother as well? His exaggerated self-importance? His uncontrollable rages at the slightest opposition? His eccentric temper? I leave it to your own common sense to decide."

Don Bartolomeo did not reply at once. He was trying to trace the workings of several possible causes for a single perplexing effect. There was something utterly insufficient, to his way of thinking, about Prince Bordelacqua's line of reasoning; and so strongly was this insufficiency borne in upon him,

that to his own surprise, he caught himself out in a sentiment of positive dislike towards Giacinto's father.

"How long is it since this suspicion occurred to your Highness?" he asked.

"Oh, as to that—it may be a year. It is difficult to say when such thoughts actually compel a man to accept them. He will struggle against them, you know."

"A year? It was a year, last week, since—"

"Since Giacinto's wedding, were you going to say?" And then, arresting the priest's inference: "You have put your finger on the sore, Don Bartolomeo. Yes, I admit it, my conscience has often tormented me as to whether I may not have been deaf to its voice at that time. Perhaps—but I cannot say certainly. There was still a doubt—and I allowed myself the benefit of it. Tell me—what ought I to do?"

Don Bartolomeo looked his questioner squarely in the eyes. For once, Prince Bordelacqua could not meet that look, and turned away his head as Giacinto had done.

"I have already given you the best advice that I have to give," said Don Bartolomeo. "The whole thing is simply a snare—of the Adversary's," he added with a marked deliberation that might mean anything or nothing. "If your Highness will

take my advice, you will dismiss it forever from your mind. That is my last word on the subject."

And he made as if about to move off in the direction taken by Giacinto. For no reason, to which he dared put a name, he was very angry. Moreover, it was so many years since he had felt any anger at all that it made him feel rather ill. Later on, of course, he would take a cooling draught, a "refresher" to ward off any ill effects of his anger; for, as all Romans are agreed, the rage that may not be expressed is dangerous—even to the extent of killing a man, if he be not careful to take a remedy against it in time.

Prince Bordelacqua, however, only shook his head; he did not appear particularly offended by Don Bartolomeo's words, but, rather, to be considering them carefully.

"Let us walk on," he said. "It is hardly safe to stand still so long, once the sun has passed over the statue there"—indicating the centre of the fountain, a water-god of polished granite, leaning on one elbow and spouting the water into the air in jets from a twisted shell.

And, as he suddenly realized how far events had travelled beyond his control along their appointed road, and at how terrific a speed they were rushing him with them on towards their inevitable goal—the

removal of his poor Giacinto from the circle of his family—the Prince all but recoiled from what had come, by now, to appear to him the terrible duty imposed upon him by Providence in its inscrutable wisdom.

“ May the holy will of Heaven be done,” he told himself repeatedly, as he walked along beside Don Bartolomeo.

When Giacinto, under the spur of his good intention of being reconciled to the “ cavaliere servente,” had struck into the maze from the garden, he had allowed himself to be distracted momentarily from the execution of his purpose by one of those little things which seem to be sometimes thrown in the path of human beings by Fate, in order to change the course of their lives.

A common sulphur-coloured butterfly was the instrument of destiny in Don Giacinto’s case. If he had not loitered in an attempt to catch it, if he had taken no notice of it and had gone on, instead, to look for De Curtis, not only Giacinto’s own after-life, but the after-lives of several other people as well, might have been altogether different. But no one may avoid his destiny, and so Giacinto was compelled to spend ten fateful minutes in chasing the yellow butterfly up and down a reach of turf; until at

last the creature, tiring of the sport, floated out of sight over the top of the hedge.

“ Pest on it! ” he panted and wiped the perspiration from his face, before setting off again upon his quest of De Curtis. It was at this moment that Prince Bordelacqua and Don Bartolomeo entered the maze, not a cable’s length behind him. That the Prince did not see Giacinto was due to a curve of the hedge which bulked between them. Thus, on they went along their appointed course, the father, equally with his son, in obedience to the unseen power that shapes all human ends.

By the time they had come to the maze, into which Giacinto had disappeared a few minutes before, Prince Bordelacqua had succeeded in attaining what he felt to have been the mental attitude of the King of Spain towards the misguided Don Carlos.

The path of the maze was of very ancient turf, and rather narrow; and Don Bartolomeo, who had no inclination to rub elbows with his companion, stood back for him to lead the way between the high, winding walls of box. The Prince, who, unlike Don Bartolomeo, had not seen Giacinto enter there, accepted the civility with a slight nod and strode on down the noiseless carpet of turf. The silence and privacy of the place harmonised exactly with his desire to collect his thoughts and to marshal his intentions. Screened from prying eyes by the hedges on either

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side of him, his features might give free play to the emotions that beset him. Of these, the most prominent was one of unfeigned gratitude for the grace that had been granted him; the grace of being able to see his duty and of having the strength to perform it. All that remained now for Heaven to do was to furnish him with a suitable occasion and pretext. This, he felt sure, would be supplied to him in due time.

CHAPTER V

THE languorous mystery of a summer's evening was slowly falling upon the garden, and that loveliest, but falsest hour of the Roman day was approaching, when the sun would disappear below the horizon and malaria would stalk its unwary victims, just as Prince Bordelacqua, all unknowingly, was stalking Giacinto.

The maze was a circular one and unusually intricate, with many a misleading turn for the ensnaring of strangers. At intervals though there were shallow niches in its walls, fitted with marble seats for repose by way of making amends in case anyone should lose his way. When Prince Bordelacqua had gone ahead of him a short distance, Don Bartolomeo remembered that he had still several pages to read of his Office for the day; and so he sat down upon one of the seats and, taking out his breviary from his pocket, began to turn its pages mechanically.

He had found his place in the book and was about to put on his spectacles when a sense of unaccountable fear suddenly took hold of him and made him glance fearfully up and down the path, his heart beating wildly and his brain benumbed. It was as

though he had seen some beast of prey padding towards him over the darkening turf. And yet, all around there was nothing but the hush of evening and the odour of sleepy flowers that was blended with the subtle indefinable primness of box and laurel.

“Either I am ill, or else this is sent to warn me against some danger,” he thought, “to put me on my guard,” and he crossed himself, with a shaking hand. At once he felt better. “That is what it is—the repressed anger,” he reflected sagely. “And, yes, perhaps a touch of fever as well. I must take a dose of some sort.”

In that instant the evening stillness was torn by a single fearful cry; and then all was deathly quiet again. As to Don Bartolomeo, he had come to his feet and was quaking in every limb, his soul full of sick compassion; for the cry had been that of a woman in all the abasement of mortal terror.

Without pausing to gather up his breviary and his spectacles from where they had fallen on the ground, he started, as fast as his legs would carry him, in the direction of that unhappy cry; and then, when he had gone no more than a very little way, a man came running at him out of the blue-green shadows where the maze curved inwards.

It was De Curtis. His mouth was wide open, and on his face,—which was grey and mottled, like a

very old cere-cloth, where the blood showed under the skin—was imprinted a certain something that made Don Bartolomeo recoil swiftly when he saw it and flatten himself against the hedge. The priest did not even speak, much less did he try to detain the runner. He understood, dimly, what had happened, and could only endeavour to summon all his courage to meet it.

“Now, God have mercy on this house!” he implored silently. He was alone again, now, for the “cavaliere servente” had torn past him and was gone—never to return.

After the butterfly had flown away from him over the hedge, Giacinto went on towards the centre of the maze, where he hoped to find his former enemy, thenceforth to be his friend. At the thought of his mother’s pleasure in seeing them reconciled, a flush of expectant satisfaction crept into his cheeks and he quickened his pace to a run, his feet, clad in the thinnest of shoes, making no sound as he drew nearer the central circle. Once the cadence of low-pitched voices came to him across the dense hedge-tops, and he fancied he caught the Princess’ tones; she seemed to be talking rapidly and in short, disjointed phrases. Of what she was saying, no more than a few words were clear to him—“love,”

"detestable," "if only." The rest was lost in murmurs and it struck Giacinto that it would add to the general goodwill if he were to surprise the couple by coming upon them unexpectedly.

Treading upon tiptoe, he stole on until he was almost within sight of their retreat. Presently, as he was on the point of advancing to the gap that led into it from the path—the talk had ceased an instant—the voice of the "cavaliere servente" was raised, ever so gently, to fall upon Giacinto's ears in syllables that sent a galvanic thrill of bewilderment through him.

"Courage, beloved—all will go well," he heard De Curtis say. "How shall we fail? Such a love as ours is beyond the reach of failure——"

At this point, Giacinto felt himself suddenly held in place by a heavy hand that was laid upon his shoulder from behind. Without so much as turning his head, he remained there rooted to the spot; he knew who was standing behind him and that something very sad and hateful was in process all about him. He wanted to cry out, but his tongue refused to obey him; the helplessness that had come over him was like that of a bad dream.

He could feel his father's noiseless fury tingle in the hand upon his shoulder as De Curtis' voice continued:

"Have no fear, dear heart—by this time to-mor-

row we shall be safely at sea, beyond the reach of your husband and his——”

“Oh, let us not even speak of him!”—they were Princess Bordelacqua’s accents that broke in, passionately, upon those of the “cavaliere servente.” “It is bad for one to hate anybody as I have come to hate that man. When I think of him, it makes me ill and cold—as if I had touched a snake. Help me to forget him. Oh, hold me close, so that I may forget——”

In the pause that followed after her voice had died in a quick sob of ecstasy, Giacinto was thrown aside so violently that he fell his whole length upon the grass. The next instant, Prince Bordelacqua stepped swiftly round into the mouth of the enclosure and was standing there, his head thrust forward and slightly sunk between his shoulders like that of a bird of prey that is looking down from a height over a valley. It was at this moment that Don Bartolomeo heard the cry of anguish that so appalled him.

As the Princess, from where she was sitting with the arms of De Curtis about her, upon an “S” shaped seat in the middle of the little amphitheatre, saw her husband, she screamed and strove to rise; but relapsed and sank back, deprived of movement and speech. All she could do was to stare, as one in a trance, at the doom confronting her in the person

of Prince Bordelacqua. At the same time, the "cavaliere servente" who had been sitting with his back to the entrance, turned in his seat and found himself looking into the eyes of the man he had conspired to betray. He was trapped beyond hope of escape, it seemed to him. And that the Prince knew everything, he could not doubt; the only question in De Curtis' mind was that of the vengeance that would inevitably be taken upon him by the motionless man in black. Would the Prince stab him, on the spot, with the long old-fashioned rapier that dangled at his side, its hilt concealed by the cloak upon his arm? Or would the end come by the hand of Stürmli, perhaps, in some remote corner, here in Rome or at Acquanera? For, although De Curtis himself carried a small-sword, he knew that if it came to a contest of fencing, Prince Bordelacqua could kill him when he pleased.

The "cavaliere servente's" brain was working with all the frantic energy of despair. His own peril had driven from him all thought of the unhappy woman at his side, except in so far as she might serve to draw from him the attention of her husband for a second, just as men have been known to throw their children from a sleigh to stop the wolves that are close upon them.

The Prince, who, hitherto, had been blocking the only outlet from the place, now began to advance

slowly towards his wife; and De Curtis braced himself to make a dash for liberty. If he were to fail—to trip or fall—Prince Bordelacqua would probably kill him on the spot. Crouching very guardedly against the hedge to which he had leapt back from the seat, his eyes measured the distance to the outlet. Once through it he was sure he could outrun his opponent and so reach the street by way of the garden. Out there, in the Lungara, he would quickly be able to find a place of safety—if he had to take refuge in the monastery church of Sant' Onofrio, where even Bordelacqua would not dare to harm him.

As to Giacinto, when he had recovered himself, which he did at once, and entered the enclosure, he had no eyes at all for the “cavaliere servente,” but only for what was taking place between his parents. At what he saw, his courage began to fail him and he almost wished that he had held back.

Neither Prince Bordelacqua nor his wife had stirred from where they were. The Prince was still standing, a few feet away from her, and she was still staring at him. Her face was so altered that, at first, Giacinto fancied it must be all a mistake and that De Curtis had been making love to some stranger. But why, then, was his father behaving in this manner? he wondered stupidly. Not until he looked closer did he see—with a feeling of terri-

fied disappointment—that the woman was, indeed, no other than his own mother. The disappointment was for himself; the terror all for her.

It was like seeing a snared bird waiting for its death blow. The feeble rise and fall of Princess Bordelacqua's breast was plainly visible to her son, as was also a spasmotic fluttering in her throat as she sat there with her head a little thrown back and her eyes drawn to those of her husband. The Prince himself appeared almost equally spellbound by the sight of her; his own complexion had turned from dark to sallow and the veins stood out like cords upon his neck and his hands. Without knowing it, he was grinding his teeth, his lower jaw working slowly from side to side, while he watched his victim's misery. And Giacinto's own resentment of her treachery was turned into an unreasoning abhorrence of the cruelty of it all, the woman's torture and the man's deliberate satisfaction in it.

Something prompted him to interpose himself between them, and he stepped quickly to beside his father.

“Will you not speak to mamma?” he ventured. “She and Signor De Curtis were only playing—it was nothing but a joke. They only wanted to make you laugh. Is not that the truth?” he appealed to his mother. Somehow, he could not bring himself to speak to De Curtis.

But she seemed not to have heard him, or else not to have understood. And then, before he could repeat his words, Prince Bordelacqua spoke at last.

“Come into the house, you,” he ordered, addressing himself to the woman on the seat. He said the words quite quietly, but yet in such a way—so it appeared to Giacinto—as to convey to her some hidden sinister meaning.

Raising one of her hands, she beat the air with it once or twice, convulsively, as though she were being strangled.

“No—no—I will not! I will not go with you!” Giacinto heard her say, thickly, in the guttural tones of one speaking in an unnatural sleep.

And then, suddenly, the limpness of physical resignation seized her, and she appeared to lose all capacity for resistance. Her hand fell upon the seat beside her with an audible thud and lay there, inert, palm uppermost. She did not seem to feel any pain from the blow, but sank back and closed her eyes, so that Giacinto thought she had fainted.

A kind of madness now took hold of her husband as he eyed her; a fury of sick memories and jealousy and stricken pride that swarmed his heart and mind as ants swarm a carcass. His cloak slid from his arm to the ground, in the action of reaching for his sword; as he drew it from its sheath the evening light played along the blade in a ripple of

watery red. He had shifted his position, too, so that he was standing between Giacinto—of whose presence he had all along appeared totally unconscious—and the white bundle on the seat. And, still, neither Giacinto nor Prince Bordelacqua had taken any notice of De Curtis.

It was only after he saw the strip of naked metal in his father's hand that Giacinto understood what was going to happen. Although there was nothing visible to him of his mother, except the hand that was resting where it had fallen on the marble—that and something of her skirt—he could see only too clearly how the Prince's shoulders were humping themselves and his right elbow was drawing back to strike down at her.

“Stop!” he called, his own blade now free in the scabbard. “Stop!—or I—”

At the sound, Prince Bordelacqua, like a guilty schoolboy detected by his master, glanced behind him; and then, as though afraid of being prevented, thrust quickly. The thing was done in the twinkling of an eye. Giacinto saw the hand on the seat close its fingers instantaneously and that was all. Nor had so much as a sigh reached his ears. He had been too late, although he could not think so.

The murderer spun round as his son sprang to attack him. A first wild pass of Giacinto's ploughed a furrow along the Prince's forearm; the next was

parried easily and went over his father's shoulder.

At that moment, when the two were thus engaged upon each other, De Curtis saw his chance at last and took it.

Drawing a deep breath, so as to fill his lungs for the effort, he poised his body an instant on his toes and then launched himself, like an arrow, across the grass, past the combatants and out into the windings of the maze. As it was, neither Prince Bordelacqua nor Giacinto had any attention to spare for him from their fighting, for, on thrusting at his father, Giacinto's foot had slipped, and, before he could recover himself, Prince Bordelacqua had closed with him, passing an arm around his body, so that their chests were touching. Thus locked, they went down together, and the next instant, a crashing blow on the lad's head from the hilt of the Prince's sword had settled the matter.

Rising from beside the stunned Giacinto, Prince Bordelacqua returned his sword to the scabbard, after wiping it upon his handkerchief, with which he proceeded to staunch the blood that was running in bright streams from his injured arm.

Desolation, utter and very appalling, swept over him as he surveyed the shipwreck of his life. He had, in reality, loved the dead woman almost insanely at times—and this was one of them. He was not angry with her any more now, because she looked

so young and ignorant as she lay there, huddled on the bench. So affected was he by the sight, that her husband buried his face in his hands. As he did so, he remembered what she had said about him to her lover.

It was as if he had swallowed some scalding, fiery poison that was burning out his entrails. Flinging back his head in the intolerable pain of it, he gave utterance, once and yet again, to a sound like the howl of a dog; and, at the noise, a startled bat wheeled up into the dusk from where it had been hovering upon his wife's dress.

“Miserable man!—what is this that you have done?” a voice demanded, awfully, behind him.

It was the theologian, Don Bartolomeo Prinetti; he was standing in the opening in the hedge, his countenance terrible in its sternness. Without waiting for the answer to his question, he brushed past Prince Bordelacqua and, running over to the Princess, tried to discover if there were any spark of life left in her. Although he could not detect one, there might be just a chance that she had not yet been called before her Judge, and that there was still time for the Chaplain to be of help to the poor, hurried soul of her. And so he pronounced the Absolution and traced the sacred sign over her with his hand.

Then he went back to where Giacinto was lying, all without any further word to the other man; there would be time enough later on for that. Nor had Prince Bordelacqua said anything in reply to the priest's question. He was calculating his next move as well as he could for the anguish of all that had happened to him.

For having killed his wife he felt not an atom of remorse. In that, he considered himself perfectly justified; at the same time it was absolutely imperative that the fact of it should be concealed if the House of Bordelacqua were not to be humbled in the dust forever. Since Prince Bordelacqua had before his eyes the fate of Count Guido Franceschini, who, two years earlier had been executed in the Piazza del Popolo for the murder of his wife, Pompilia Comparini. During the trial, Prince Bordelacqua, with many others of his way of thinking, (to whom it seemed monstrous that a man—and a noble at that—should be denied the right to kill his unfaithful wife, as a large section of public opinion had deemed Pompilia), had done all in his power to obtain mercy for Franceschini from the Pope. But they had failed to shake the Holy Father's conviction that a murder was a murder and not an act of private justice; and so the Count had perished.

That he, Ferdinando Bordelacqua, an hereditary supporter of the papal throne and some twelve

times a Grandee of Spain, should die under the blade of the “mannaia” (as the Italian guillotine was called) was unthinkable; as was it also that the world at large should know of the shame of Princess Bordelacqua’s infidelity. There were few lengths, indeed, to which he would not willingly go for the sake of averting from them such an indelible, infamous disgrace as must, if the truth should ever come to light, sully and defile his stupendous name and honours. Also, he must act promptly and unerringly, as he saw, if he were to be successful in this. There was only one single way out of the danger, and he had made up his mind to take it.

And now, for the first time, he realised that De Curtis was gone and had escaped him. How much had the “cavaliere servente” seen? he asked himself. Everything?—he could hardly think so. And yet he had no very clear impression at all—such had been his blind fury with his wife—of what had become of De Curtis, after the first moment of his, Prince Bordelacqua’s, surprise of the guilty pair. In any case, though, it seemed to him unbelievable that the fellow should have had the courage to remain at hand until the consummation of the tragedy; most likely, thought the Prince, he had slipped out unperceived, as quickly as possibly after the discovery of his sin. That he was now somewhere out of reach was certain; so that any open endeavour to

recapture him must be attended with too great a risk to the reputation of Casa Bordelacqua to allow of its being contemplated. None the less, his escape was a dire calamity. Even if he had not been actually a witness of his paramour's death at the hands of her outraged husband—and so not in a position to testify against Prince Bordelacqua as the slayer of his wife—yet he was still at large to boast—an evil death to him!—of his conquest of the Princess. In which the Prince did the “cavaliere servente” an injustice; because De Curtis, all his cowardice and selfishness notwithstanding, would rather have died than do such a thing.

Thinking thus, the Prince's eyes fell to Giacinto; at first he could not help regretting, almost, that he had not killed him, too—it would have made matters infinitely easier. And then he remembered the fortified farm in the Sabines.

“Heaven be praised!” exclaimed Don Bartolomeo fervently, bending over Giacinto—“he is only stunned.” And drawing himself up, he demanded again: “What have you been doing here, I ask you?”

But the other could not very easily find his tongue.

“You see for yourself what has happened,” he stammered. “God's will be done. As you perceive,”—showing his arm wrapped in the blood-soaked

handkerchief—"he even came near to killing his father as well."

Stooping, he picked up Giacinto's sword and held it out by the handle to Don Bartolomeo, that he might note the spots and smears that dulled it.

"It is just as I told you, Don Bartolomeo. He is not responsible for what he does. I accept it in punishment for my sins."

Don Bartolomeo scanned the sword and made a gesture with his hand as if to wave the detestable piece of evidence from him. He was in no condition to think clearly; but all the same, he was beginning to feel an almost unaccountable distrust of anything that this man might say or do.

"I must summon help for all that must be done," he said, moving away a little.

"No, do you wait here," returned Prince Borde-lacqua abruptly, "and I will fetch what help is wanted, myself."

And, with that, he went away, leaving Don Bartolomeo alone with the dead woman and the still insensible Giacinto. Try as he would, the old man could not bring himself to believe that the boy whom he so loved and who had, but so short a time before, promised to give up his anger, could be guilty of so monstrous a crime.

"Unless—unless—his father is right and I am wrong"—he thought—"unless Giacinto is a maniac,

it is impossible that he can have done this. I would answer for it with my head. And why was the other man, the *cavaliere servente*, running away like that? Was it from Giacinto that he ran or from——?”

His lips refused to complete the sentence, although it had been shaping itself in his mind ever since he had heard the Princess' cry of fear and had seen the look on De Curtis' face as he fled past him a moment later.

The weakness and trembling that had then shaken Don Bartolomeo were returning to him, and he had to step to the marble seat to lean a hand upon the back of it in order to save his knees from giving way under him.

Again and again, during all the years he had been Chaplain of Casa Bordelacqua, Don Bartolomeo—much against his will—had been vaguely disquieted over certain trivial irregularities of conduct that he had noticed between Princess Bordelacqua and her “*cavaliere servente*.” Not that he had ever seen anything exactly wrong between them, or he would have taken one or both very severely to task for it. He would have warned them against a repetition of any undue familiarity; and if the matter had been a serious one, he would even have considered it his duty to notify Prince Bordelacqua. This, of course, does not mean that he would ever have acted in any

way upon anything learned in the confessional; but only upon such things as he might have seen or heard outside it.

Not once, nor twice, but a hundred times, he had marked a look from one to the other, or caught an inflection in their tones that had struck him with a disagreeable suggestion of some covert understanding between the Prince's wife and De Curtis.

Now, the peasant's inherent tendency to suspicion was strong in Don Bartolomeo. His parents had been tillers of the soil at Belforte in the Marches, and the people of the Marches are even quicker to suspect than are the Romans themselves. As a good Christian he had repeatedly put his suspicions behind him. But, sooner or later, they always came back again, when least expected; thus they had become more or less a habit of mind with him; even when absent, their room was ready for them in the house of his thoughts.

Sometimes, he had been led to fancy, too, that Prince Bordelacqua shared those misgivings with him; as has been seen, he was not altogether mistaken in so supposing. Frequently, indeed, he had almost expected some manifestation of the Prince's displeasure that might have done good in the same way that a thunderstorm clears the air. But no; the storm had continued to brew in silence, until Don

Bartolomeo could have cried out for very uneasiness.

And now, without warning, it had broken; that, at least, had been his first impression of De Curtis' flight. On entering the centre of the maze he had been absolutely sure of it. And Prince Bordelacqua's explanation—rather to Don Bartolomeo's own surprise—had not shaken this conviction in the slightest, because it had its foundations too deep down in the years of fearful expectancy on the priest's part.

Of this much, he was positive; that he had just been called upon to enter into a long and uncertain warfare on the side of his beloved Giacinto—either against the onslaughts of madness, or, else, the machinations of Prince Bordelacqua himself. For the latter's detestation of his first-born, as well as his preference for Cesare, the younger son, admitted of no question.

This being so, it was only natural that Don Bartolomeo should incline to believe that the Prince had lied and that he meant to make use of the whole tragedy to further his own ends. The only other person who knew the truth of that tragedy was Giacinto; and—yes, it might well be that Giacinto would never consent to save himself at the price of such a secret.

Above all, if Don Bartolomeo meant to help

Giacinto, it could only be through continued companionship, to insure which he must appear to believe the worst of him to Prince Bordelacqua. Otherwise, the chances were that they would never be allowed to meet again. For Don Bartolomeo was beginning to foresee something of coming events as he stood there, alone with the riddle of the dead woman and her son. It was not until he had remained so for some minutes that he bethought him of the most urgent need of the moment, and set off to fetch water from the fountain with which to revive Giacinto. For this purpose, he served himself of the lad's hat as a cup.

On nearing the fountain he saw coming toward him Prince Bordelacqua, Stürmli and Pio Sacchetti. Seeing Don Bartolomeo, the Prince merely glanced at him searchingly, and passed on; but Stürmli, who came after with the steward, said something behind his hand to his companion, as though to ask him a question about the priest. Pio Sacchetti, however, did not answer, but only shrugged his shoulders and shook his head with a contemptuous protrusion of his underlip.

When they had gone by, Don Bartolomeo followed them, reaching the centre of the maze just as Prince Bordelacqua was directing the others to carry his wife's body into the palace by way of the side-stair and the upper colonnade. As she lay

there, her head pillow'd on the back of the marble seat, a ray of sunset struck full upon the Princess' face, turning its grey to saffron green like that of the dead Christ in Paolo Morando's mighty painting in Verona of the descent from the Cross. While Stürmli was engaged in fastening Giacinto's unsheathed sword by a string to his own belt, the Prince laid his cloak over the dead woman, concealing her, completely, from head to foot.

“Carry the Princess up to her room and lay her on the bed with the cloak over her,” he said. “Then lock the door and come back here. If you meet any one and they ask any questions of you, you will not answer them—enough!”

Some hours later, a company of horsemen trotted out under the great main entrance of the palace and clattered down the Lungara towards the south-eastern part of the city. From the Lungara it struck into the Lungarella and on by the frowning, sullen Torre dell' Anguillara, a vast barrack, part mansion and part fortress, the stronghold of the Counts of Anguillara in the Middle Ages. Skirting the river, the little cavalcade came to one of the two oldest bridges in Rome, the Ponte Cestio, and crossed by it to the Isola Tiberina, in the middle of the turgid yellow stream. On the other side of

the island another bridge, the Ponte Fabricio, enabled them to reach the opposite bank and the Aurelian city.

Prince Bordelacqua, who rode at the head of the company, was bound for Castel Gandolfo, whither, to the immense palace among the woods, the Pope and the papal Court had retreated earlier than usual from the Roman heats that summer.

The night was fairly cool; and as the Prince's errand was one that did not admit of delay, he put his horse into a canter as soon as he had passed by the Porta San Sebastiano into the open country. He was considerably exercised as to what the Pope might say to him when he should lay his case before him and ask that the painful scandal be hushed up as much as possible for the sake of all concerned. An official inquiry of the papal authorities into the whole business was the last thing that Prince Bordelacqua desired. Even if there were no particular danger involved in it for himself—and there could be none, since any inquiry must resolve itself into a choice between accepting the evidence of a father or that of his son—the family humiliation and shame would be just the same.

So he was going to plead his own cause before the Pope, and to beg that his grievous sorrow might not be allowed to become a byword and a public re-

proach to unborn generations of his house that had always been so loyal a support of the papal throne. He had to admit to himself that Innocent XII had had cause for anger in the past against him and his methods; but he knew, too, that, for all his irascibility, the Holy Father was at heart the kindest and most conciliatory of men. Moreover the sovereign Pontiff must surely sympathise personally with his much afflicted subject when the Prince should confess, that the hand of Heaven had fallen upon him for his former want of filial piety toward the Father of Christendom.

On, over the moonlit Campagna they went, he and Stürmli and five of the men-at-arms. The moon was now high in the sky to the south of Rome, a pale disc among the grey and silver clouds that a light west wind was chasing across the horizon towards the Sabine hills. Everything was very still save for the ringing of the horses' hoofs upon the long straight road, that and the occasional distant bark of a fox. Once, as they passed the huge tower of Cecilia Metella's tomb, its blocks of limestone turned to bronze in the moonlight, the Prince raised his head to scan the Heavens as though seeking to find there some inspiration to guide him in his interview with the Pope. At once, he lowered it again and stared out moodily before him at the ruins of the old Castle of the Caetani that Pope Sixtus V.

had caused to be destroyed, so that it might never again be a menace to the city on that side.

Back in Palazzo Bordelacqua, in the terror-stricken gloom of Giacinto's bedroom, where a coiled wax taper burned dimly on a table beside the bed, Don Bartolomeo was keeping watch over his pupil's fitful, lethargic slumbers.

The lad's unconsciousness had been succeeded by a short period of such feverish excitement and semi-delirium that the priest had given him a sleeping-draught distilled from poppies; Giacinto had soon fallen asleep and Don Bartolomeo had sat down in a chair to keep guard over him while he slept. As he watched the white young face among the pillows, the good man sighed and peered anxiously, once more, at the bruised, discoloured temple.

“Oh, Absalom, my son—my son!” he murmured, his eyes shining with tears of pity and affection. For it seemed to Don Bartolomeo—who loved him as tenderly as if he were really his son—that since Giacinto’s own father was what he was, he himself, the friend and tutor, had been summoned to fill a father’s place towards the boy.

He had learned of Prince Bordelacqua’s departure from one of the servants; but no one could tell him whither the Prince had been bound or with what purpose. But Don Bartolomeo had guessed that he meant to go to Castel Gandolfo, and had resigned

himself to awaiting the result with a feeling almost of despair. He had very little doubt of what that result would be.

The Sovereign Pontiff would begin by inclining to order Giacinto's arrest for matricide and would end by consenting to his being kept, instead, under strict detention, by his father or his brother for the rest of his days. There would be talk of an inquiry into the boy's mental condition, in order to determine whether he were insane or not. And, presumably, his marriage with Donna Fiordelisa would be annulled.

On the other hand, even if Giacinto could be brought to contradict his father's statement by defiling his mother's memory before all the world—which was not to be imagined—who would believe him? No one but would say that he had told a vile falsehood in order to recover his liberty and his inheritance. He would be universally condemned and sent back into confinement, while Prince Bordelacqua would be the object of general commiseration as the husband of such a wife and the father of such a son.

And then, again, there was the further terrific question of whether, after all, the Prince might not have been telling the truth in accusing Giacinto of murdering his mother. If that were so—but Don Bartolomeo's whole instinct revolted against the very idea of it; it would require far more than

Prince Bordelacqua's unsupported statement to convince him of so monstrous a thing. And, what was more, he could not help feeling sure that one other person, at least—namely, the Bishop of Anagni—would be inclined to think much as he did in the matter.

The hush of death reigned supreme in the palace. Throughout the entire building no sound broke the silence; from the courtyard to the attics, where were the quarters of the halberdiers and the menservants, none spoke but with bated breath and in whispers. The Princess had been already laid, dressed as she was, in a coffin in her room; it had been given out that she had died of an aneurism, and no one—Don Bartolomeo himself, Stürmli and Pio Sacchetti excepted—but believed it. The members of the household were now taking turns in praying by the coffin for the repose of her soul; praying noiselessly, save when, now and again, a sob would escape from one or another of them; for Giulia Pandolfi had been kind to her servants.

Don Cesare, too, had been taken in by Don Bartolomeo to see his mother as she lay there. For a while he had gazed, wonder-stricken, at the strange sight; until at last, the dread actuality of it had suddenly overpowered him, and he had had to be led away, weeping brokenly.

CHAPTER VI

DONNA FIORDELISA's room at the Ursuline Convent at Castel Gandolfo, looked out to the east, over the Lake of Albano; the convent itself being situated at the northern end of the little town, separated from the nearest building by an ample garden enclosed by a high wall, so that the nuns might take the air without loss of privacy. Not once, in the two years that she had spent in the convent since her wedding, had Fiordelisa passed beyond that wall into the world outside. Day by day she had continued to lead her life within its confines and was becoming so accustomed to her existence there that she no longer repined as she had done at first, under the constant discipline of it. On the contrary, she had grown to rather like the kindly atmosphere of the place, and to be reconciled to its limitations. For she was still too young to feel deprived by them of any considerable amount of personal liberty.

There was a good deal, too, to occupy her, so that she had little leisure either for looking forward to the radiant future with Giacinto or for regretting the gracious freedom of the past in the Veneto—for so she was accustomed to term the whole wide country between the mountains and the Adriatic; for

there were lessons to be learned, and embroidery to be done, as well as some proficiency in the fine arts to be acquired before she could take her place in the world as a great lady with ordinary justice to her position.

Besides herself, there were several other young girls; for the Ursulines are a teaching order. If, unlike her companions, Fiordelisa did not go home for an occasional holiday, that was because Donna Olimpia did not wish it; since the Abbess considered it her duty to fashion the soul of Fiordelisa into such permanent shape as should be capable of withstanding all the changes and chances of the ruder life outside the cloister. It was even a concession that she allowed the girl to keep a miniature of her husband in her room. To his miniature Fiordelisa had renewed her vow of unchanging love, a thousand times with countless kisses and caresses. Times innumerable she had pressed her lips to the portrait's face, both in gladness and in the yearnings of separation, watering it with her tears or smiling back her hopes in response to the smile upon its lifeless lips. Once only had Donna Olimpia had occasion to punish Fiordelisa for some small act of disobedience—and she had done it most efficaciously by confiscating the miniature during an entire day. After that, she never again had to find the slightest fault with her ward's behaviour. For the

girl-wife would have endured torture uncomplainingly to retain the treasured privilege of holding communication with her husband's likeness. Indeed, her passionate attachment to it was such that Donna Olimpia sometimes had doubts whether she were doing quite rightly in allowing Fiordelisa to keep the picture at all; but, save on that one occasion, she could never harden her heart enough to deprive her of it.

And so the life went on at the convent, until one summer's evening, in the second year, when Fiordelisa was sitting in a deep window-seat in her "cell," as she had been taught to call it. She was sewing, and as she sewed she gazed at the miniature that was propped up in front of her against the opposite wall of the vaulted embrasure.

Suddenly, the door was opened and one of the nuns came into the little room almost before its occupant had time to slip down from her perch, her work still in her hand, and curtsey to her visitor.

The nun, who was young and rather pretty, looked unusually white and fragile, as she stood there, regarding Fiordelisa gravely with her large, dark eyes.

"The reverend Mother sends me to request that you will go to her," she said. "She awaits you in her cell."

At once Fiordelisa stuck her needle into the piece

of work and followed the sister into a long, white-washed corridor, the girl chatting gaily, while her companion replied in low monosyllables, until they reached the door of the Abbess' cell.

In answer to a tap on the panel, Donna Olimpia's voice called out "Enter," and Fiordelisa went in, leaving the sister in the corridor.

Donna Olimpia was leaning back—a thing that her niece had never known her to do before—in the only chair in the place, before a niche in the wall containing a crucifix and the upper part of a skull. Her back was turned towards the door and she did not stir for some seconds after Fiordelisa had entered the cell.

At last she told the girl to come over to her—still without turning—which Fiordelisa did and stood beside the chair.

All she could see of her aunt's face was the profile that looked like beeswax in the yellow glare of evening. The Abbess' deeply sunken eyes were riveted on the crucifix and her hands were hidden in the wide sleeves of her habit; but her lips were moving as if in prayer. When Fiordelisa saw this she was frightened.

"Aunt Olimpia, are you ill?" she asked uneasily, for the old lady seemed to be oblivious of her presence.

"No, my child, I am not ill—in the sense you

mean," Donna Olimpia replied in a strained far-away voice like that of a person who has been through some great physical effort. And then, as if to prove the truth of her words, she stood up, and laying her hands on Fiordelisa's shoulders, kissed her on both cheeks with the deliberate sisterliness of one Religieuse to another; so that the girl felt at one and the same time a feeling of astonished exaltation and an indefinable misgiving. For Donna Olimpia had given her the kiss of peace, and so had, as it were, raised her to an equality with herself, upon the basis of some unknown mutual bond of detachment from worldly things.

"Sit down there, on the bed," said the Abbess, pointing to the recess where stood a wooden bedstead covered with a single, neatly folded blanket. "I sent for you, because—because I have something to say to you," she added lamely.

Fiordelisa, her heart beating with an ever-increasing shadowy premonition, obeyed, and seated herself on the edge of the bed, her eyes upon her aunt, who had turned away and was crossing the floor to the window of the cell. There she remained in silence for a space, gathering her forces in the cool wind that was billowing up to her across the lake, whilst Fiordelisa watched her in rising suspense.

Presently, Donna Olimpia left the window and came back to her chair, which she placed sideways to

the bed and close to it, so that, as before, only the outline of her face was visible to the girl. There was no sign now of weakness or indecision about the experienced old nun as she resumed:

“ My very dear little Fiordelisa, since you have been living here in our community, many things must have become plain to you that were not plain before. For instance, I think you must have learned from the lives of others—the daily life of complete self-surrender to the Divine Will and of perfect trust in the wisdom and love of God for His creatures—to feel something of that confidence in Him yourself. Is it not so? Tell me——”

“ But yes, of course, I know that we must have trust and belief in the goodness of God,” said Fiordelisa. “ But why do you ask, Aunt Olimpia? ” she queried. Her uneasiness now amounted to positive terror at the Abbess’ words and her manner in speaking them.

“ I ask because I wanted to be sure of it. If Heaven were to demand from you a proof of your love and of your confidence in its love for you, is there anything at all that you feel you could refuse it? Examine yourself, my dear, and think well before you answer.”

Fiordelisa could only stare, spellbound, with a kind of dreary fascination at the outline of the features before her, which were no longer livid but only

sombre against the lemon-tinted background of sky.

"I—I do not understand," she faltered. "What is there that I could give up? I do not understand," she repeated unhappily.

"Supposing it were asked of you that you should give up something of which you are very fond—the miniature of—of Giacinto," returned Donna Olimpia brokenly. In spite of her self-control, her voice had dropped to the tremulous whisper in which she was wont to lay bare her soul to her confessor. "Fiordelisa—could you do it?"

"Aunt Olimpia—what do you mean? Have I deserved to be punished again? Have I done anything wrong?"—the girl leaned forward and laid a hand in supplication upon the other's arm. "What have I done to displease you? But you cannot mean it—you cannot mean that you are going to take it away from me? What have I done wrong?" she implored.

Donna Olimpia had known numberless sad and difficult moments in her life, but none, perhaps, quite so poignant as that which now confronted her. The duty that had devolved upon her shoulders since the morning of that same day, when a hastily written letter had been left at the convent gate by Prince Bordelacqua on his way back to Rome, was one of the hardest she had ever had to perform.

Since reading the letter, in which,—in the disjointed phrases of one who was himself half crazed by suffering, her brother told of his wife's murder and Giacinto's madness,—Donna Olimpia had passed the hours in the chapel praying for him and for her nephew, and for the soul of her sister-in-law. She had tasted nothing but her own tears since the morning collation; but she had succeeded in obtaining sufficient strength to break at least a part of the atrocious tidings to Fiordelisa—the news of her husband's insanity that would probably entail the dissolution of their marriage. For herself, the Abbess had long ceased to murmur at the judgments of Heaven, having learned to see in them nothing but good, hidden or otherwise.

“No, you have done no wrong,” she said. “No,—it is not that, but—now try to be brave, Fiordelisa. I want you to believe that everything that is allowed to happen to us is for the best. If we sometimes have to give up certain things—certain things—and certain people—it is only because we are meant to find our true happiness in other things—and in other people.”

In speaking, she had turned and had taken Fiordelisa's two hands in her own.

There ensued a brief pause; and then, rising from the chair, Donna Olimpia sat down beside her niece

on the bed. Putting an arm about the girl, she drew her gently to her until the golden head rested upon her breast.

Although her aunt had spoken no name, yet Fiordelisa was beginning to understand. And, as the tense silence continued between them, the contact with Donna Olimpia seemed to name the sacrifice required of her, the sacrifice which, as the Abbess knew, the silence would designate more unmistakably and much more mercifully than she herself could do.

“Is it—Giacinto?” Fiordelisa asked, all but inaudibly, after an age of irresolution.

“Yes—it is Giacinto,” replied Donna Olimpia, speaking very rapidly lest her own courage might fail her. “He has been taken from us. No, he is not dead,—but—but he will always be very ill in his head. He will be cared for, with every tenderness, so that he will feel no pain; nor will he be unhappy. But he will not be quite the same as—as are other people, as are the rest of us. And so—and so that is what I meant by saying that a sacrifice——”

Then she stopped at thought of the hideous truth which she could not yet bring herself to inflict upon Fiordelisa; the harrowing particulars of the Princess’ end, and of Giacinto’s crime. She was waiting for the girl to give some sign of her desolation,

to utter some complaint, to cry out, even; but no sound came from her.

Suddenly, just as she could bear Fiordelisa's dreadful, soundless agony no longer, Donna Olimpia felt the slender form grow rigid and stiffen against her; and, immediately afterwards, it seemed to become inert and flaccid.

When she understood what had happened, the Abbess laid Fiordelisa down upon the bed and rang her bell peremptorily for the pretty, white-faced sister to come to her without delay.

But later, when the physician from the town had come and gone away again, after prescribing some soothing medicine and much quiet for the patient, Donna Olimpia, taper in hand, laid the piece of sewing with the needle still sticking in it beside the picture of Giacinto.

First she glanced at the picture and then at Fiordelisa who was at last healthily asleep in her bed, spent with alternate periods of fainting and storms of furious stricken love, and rebellion against Fate, such as her aunt could never have believed possible in one otherwise so gentle and submissive. For Fiordelisa's anger and grief had not been like those of a child, but of a grown woman, with all the strength of purpose of an unforgiving woman's

hated against those who seek to take from her the man she loves.

So that Donna Olimpia, instead of removing the miniature, only studied its features awhile, undecided how to act for the best; finally, she turned away and left the place noiselessly, leaving the painted oval of ivory where she had found it, in the shadows of the window-seat.

Back once more in her own cell, the Abbess sank upon her knees before the niche in the wall. Near an hour she remained so, motionless, until the moon was visible across the lake, a whitish bomb in the cloud-seas over the hills towards Marino. Then she rose, tottering slightly from fatigue and fasting.

On the little table, by the window, a plate of food had been set for her with a cup of wine and water; having eaten something and moistened her lips at the cup, she began to prepare for rest. As she was laying aside her veil, an unexpected thought came to her rescue and she considered it thankfully.

“It may be,” she reflected, “that the child is to receive a vocation after all. Ah, if only that favour were to be granted her—then, indeed, I might sing *Nunc dimittis*. But what presumption is this, that I venture to apply to myself the words of the holy man Simeon? May I be forgiven! I scarcely know what I am saying.”

When she saw Fiordelisa again, the next morning, Donna Olimpia was aware of an extraordinary and very disconcerting change in her.

In the few hours that had elapsed since she had last seen her, the girl seemed to have become someone else. From childhood she had passed over into womanhood during the short summer's night, so that Donna Olimpia could hardly believe her own eyes.

On going into her niece's cell to see how she was progressing, the Abbess was met by a person whom she had difficulty in recognising as the Fiordelisa of yesterday. Every vestige of colour was gone from the girl's face, as though she were recovering from a prolonged illness. She appeared taller, too, as if her height had been increased by weeks or months spent upon a sick-bed; her eyes seemed darker than before, and her expression had in it something enigmatical and secretive. Her whole manner, moreover, was expressive of an intense new loneliness and consequent hardening of character.

Albeit she answered Donna Olimpia's inquiry with her accustomed respectful attention, yet her tones were so oddly dignified and self-controlled that the Abbess actually felt herself to be speaking to a widow to whom an especial deference was due on account of her bereavement.

Nothing more was ever said about the miniature,

and it continued to smile out upon the world from which its original had been banished by the permission granted by Pope Innocent to Prince Borde-lacqua to remove his deranged son to safe keeping in some secluded corner of his estates, and to bury his dead wife privately by night in the chapel of his own palace.

It had been towards dawn when Fiordelisa awoke and lay watching a shaft of phosphorescent light thrown up on the ceiling of her cell by the reflection of the waning moonlight in the lake, seventy fathoms below the convent walls.

As she stared up at the quaking brightness, it seemed to her that she saw things more clearly than she had done before falling asleep. Either she would cleave to her husband, or she would become a nun like Aunt Olimpia. If Giacinto needed to be taken care of, who had so good a right as she to take care of him? It might be, too, that he would get well again. If the Madonna of Loretto, for example, would heal him by her intercession, Fiordelisa would show a gratitude the equal of any queen's. For Fiordelisa had as complete a confidence in the power and the charity of Our Lady of Loretto as any of her own peasants at San Giorgio.

Somehow although she could not understand why,

the very unexpectedness of the disastrous news about Giacinto now seemed to make it ring false. She could not any longer believe that it was perfectly true, as she had been surprised into believing, the night before. Like Don Bartolomeo, she was quick to suspect. Not that she knew whom or what to suspect in this case; but she suspected, instinctively, the truth of whatsoever it might be that she wished to prove untrue. And so it came about, that she was beginning to search her brain for some means of disproving—if only to herself—the hateful lie of Giacinto's insanity.

“I have it,” she said presently, to the light on the ceiling. “I will write him a letter. If he writes back to me, then I shall be able to tell for myself. And—but how shall I get the letter to him, and how is his answer to reach me? Everybody is against us—I am sure of it—and I can trust no one here. Oh, if only I were back in the Veneto—or if only one of my people were here to serve me!”

Patiently, and from every point of view, she examined the very difficult problem of how to establish communication between her husband and herself. With methodical impartiality she tested every means she could think of, only to reject one after the other as faulty; the clearness of her reasoning powers, following as it did so close upon the temporary loss of them, a few hours earlier, and in the

face of so dire a situation, was characteristic of her race. There she lay, plotting, long and quite dispassionately, hour after hour, for the reunion of Giacinto and herself. At length, when the cell was turning grey in the chilly daybreak, she sighed and fell asleep again. She had decided upon her plan of action. This plan included the active coöperation of her former nurse, Teresinella, for one thing; and, for another, the keeping of a most vigilant and incessant watch over her own every slightest word and action so as not to betray herself to those about her.

Now the nurse in an Italian family, such as those of Prince Bordelacqua and his brother-in-law, the Prince of Savigliano, has always occupied a singularly privileged position. Whensoever she chooses—generally two or three times in the year, if she is no longer actually living in the family of her foster-child, or is otherwise separated from her—she has the right to see him or her alone and to make a small offering of cake or sweetmeats or such-like. In return, the nurse receives a present of money or new clothes, or else, perhaps, the aid of her foster-child's influence in obtaining some favour for the nurse's own children, in the way of employment, or in that of the coveted admission to a theological seminary.

As a foster-nurse Teresinella was entitled to life-long board and lodging at the hands of her patrons and might choose her own place of residence,

whether in Prince Bordelacqua's town-palace or in his country-house.

After Fiordelisa had been taken away from her, however, by Donna Olimpia, Teresinella had no longer found any pleasure in eating the Prince's bread. None the less, she had continued to live on in Palazzo Bordelacqua for some time after that; until, at last, she had been unable any longer to endure the exile from her own country combined with the hourly slights put upon her by the steward—who had been allowed to gather that his master disapproved Teresinella's choice in remaining so near Donna Fiordelisa instead of betaking herself elsewhere. And so, a few weeks prior to the tragedy of the maze, she had suddenly set off on foot for her tiny dwelling on Fiordelisa's land in the Veneto. Since Fiordelisa's marriage, Teresinella had only been once to the convent with a supply of home-made comfits for her darling; and had promised to come again on the twenty-ninth of June, the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, which fell upon a Saturday in that summer of 1698.

The evening when Fiordelisa had been sent for by the Abbess, and had fainted on her breast, was that of the Thursday preceding the Feast; thus she had only a day to wait before her next meeting with Teresinella in the convent parlour. Fiordelisa would then be placed as of yore, upon her nurse's

knee, and might whisper, as she felt and feared, all her distrusts and her desires into the sympathetic ear of the beautiful Venetian.

At the same time she must have the letter for Giacinto ready for Teresinella to convey, by some means or other, to him without the knowledge of any enemy. How the nurse was to do this, Fiordelisa could not imagine; but, that done it would be, if humanly possible, it never came into her head to doubt. The spare moments of that day were therefore employed by her in composing the letter, which she kept concealed upon her, until the time should come for entrusting it to Teresinella.

But Teresinella never came back to the convent; nor were she and her foster-child to meet again until long after, and in conditions differing widely from those of the sheltered convent parlour at Castel Gandolfo.

For nearly four years from the night of that memorable interview with Donna Olimpia, Fiordelisa was condemned to an ignorance that was worse than death. In all that time no single word ever reached her of Giacinto or his fate; nor did she once weaken to the point of asking for news of him from Donna Olimpia, because she did not intend that even her aunt should glimpse her constancy or see how unchangeably she loved, and only lived for, her beloved. Only Fiordelisa herself knew through what

darkness of soul and mind she had to pass, unaided and alone, in those four years; her wrestlings with despair and its kindred temptations in the solitude of her cell; the days and weeks of such black despondency that she could not pray at all. But there were, also, rare periods of the purest happiness for her, an unquestioning all-conquering joy of life, during which, so long as they lasted, she was not afraid of anything, either for Giacinto or for herself. But throughout all, the darkness and the light alike, she never wavered from her purpose. Let come what might, she would rejoin Giacinto and they two should be free, together, however craftily their enemies might seek to imprison them apart. For she had never really believed otherwise than that her husband was the victim of an enemy; though how, exactly, or who that enemy might be, she had no way of ascertaining so long as she was at the convent. Donna Olimpia had not told Fiordelisa that Princess Bordelacqua was dead until some weeks after breaking to her the news about Giacinto; but she had been careful to say nothing of the manner of the Princess' death, leaving the girl to suppose that it had occurred from natural causes.

And so, at last, the great day came, in due course, the day of Fiordelisa's return to the world; a sultry, thundery morning of July, and her sixteenth birthday.

It was quite early, barely five o'clock, when the convent gates were opened by the portress to admit a heavy coach, the body of it hung upon straps and drawn by four black horses. Behind the coach rode Anton Stürmli, upon another black horse, and wearing his summer livery beneath an oil-cloth coat for fear of rain. He had a letter for the Abbess from his master, which he delivered without so much as opening his mouth to speak; there he sat in the courtyard and there Fiordelisa saw him again, for the first time in six years, as motionless and as menacing as he had seemed to her on her wedding day. She had expected to see instead, her friend Salvatore Gozzoli; but it did not surprise her, for any changes might have been possible since her incarceration. The only impression it made on her was one of a strange feeling as of having lost her way on the road of life.

Before she was quite ready for it, the thought came to her of how utterly unlike it all was to what she had once expected to feel in the hour of her return to Giacinto. And yet she had been yearning for this first chance to begin her fight for him, infinitely more than she ever longed for anything in all her life.

She had come down into the entrance hall of the convent with her aunt and they were standing in the doorway, when Stürmli caught sight of her. Tak-

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ing off his helmet, he rested it before him upon his saddle until Fiordelisa had stepped into the coach. Thereupon, covering himself once more, he barked an order, in obedience to which the ponderous vehicle lumbered out of the courtyard and began to roll slowly back along the road to Rome.

CHAPTER VII

FROM Castel Gandolfo the land fell away rather abruptly through woods of chestnut trees and ilexes and elms to the plain of the Campagna. At the village of San Giorgio, where the highroad joined the Appian Way, the coach halted to allow of some alteration in the harness of the horses, while Fior-delisa sat back and gazed through the open window at the unfamiliar scene. The change from the hemmed-in surroundings of the convent, even in those few miles, was such as to make her feel confused, and now, as she was being drawn back helpless into the swift current of the outer world, her once firm resolve and high courage, as well as her former absolute conviction of the justice of her cause, seemed to have grown weaker, too, and less intolerant of opposition.

But not for long; presently, the coach moved on again and the air was soon full of many a cherished, half-forgotten sound and smell that caused the blood to pulse in her as it had not done for five years and more; the peculiar, acrid smell of dust and oxen and sunburned grass, as a sly gust of storm-wind played over it; of the grape must from a roadside wine shop, as the eddies of capricious breeze scoured and

whorled in its dark recesses; the song and cry of birds, meadow-lark and blackbird and plover; the jangling of the bells upon wine carriers' carts, and the occasional, distant lowing of cattle—all these things were to Fiordelisa like the first sip from a cup long untasted and filled to the brim with the new wine of life.

Between San Giorgio and Rome the road taken by the coach was that now known as the Via Appia Nuova, the old Via Tuscolana. Had Fiordelisa been in the mood to feel any sustained interest in the landscape, she might have found plenty to occupy her attention in the tombs and other remains of antiquity that flanked the way at intervals. But she was far too busy with her own affairs to allow of her taking any but a very transient pleasure in such things.

The time remaining in which to prepare herself for the coming contest—with whom or what she scarcely knew—seemed already too short. Soon, she would be no longer alone, to think and plan, unhampered by any hostile influence, but would be surrounded by the forces of the man she dreaded more than all others for his power over her, Prince Bordelacqua. For it was plain, that his, and his alone, had been the will to direct, hitherto, the lot of Giacinto and of herself. As she had not yet learned of how the Princess had died, her uncle had, indeed,

an effectual weapon to his hand with which to carry out his purpose of turning the girl's love for her husband into abhorrence. Thus, the old Prince had argued to himself, there would be little or no difficulty in persuading Fiordelisa to consent to the annulment of her marriage with Giacinto; not that her consent to such a measure was indispensable, but that it would make the affair much simpler than it might otherwise be.

Before leaving the convent, Fiordelisa had hung the miniature of Giacinto by a ribbon from her neck beneath the bodice of her dress; now that there was no one to see her, she drew it out and studied it carefully once more, as she had so often done in the privacy of her cell. She could find in it no sign at all of anything to show that he was in any way mentally different to herself. Now, as she looked at it, her suspicions became again almost a certainty. Either there had been some terrible mistake; or, else, Giacinto was the victim of what was known, even to young girls of that day, like Fiordelisa, as a "family conspiracy."

"A family conspiracy——" As she whispered the ominous formula, she felt cold, as though a chill had struck her, for all the lowering closeness of the day.

Presently, however, she began to reason with herself. She was now sixteen; in a very few years she

would be her own mistress, with full authority to order her life as she pleased. Once she were of age, she might defy the whole world to come between herself and Giacinto—if, only, he should then be still alive, and if nothing should have happened meanwhile to deprive him really of his mind.

But, if, again, the whole thing were nothing but a conspiracy to put him out of the way for some reason or other, what, in that case, would be the intention of his enemies towards herself? Would they wish her to become a nun? Or did they think—and, for the first time, a ray of real light broke upon her—to bring about her marriage with another than Giacinto? With his brother Cesare, for instance? —for she could think of no one else. And, at the thought, Fiordelisa's fair young face became instantly very grave, and set in a mould of indomitable determination.

By the time the coach reached Rome and passed in under the frowning archway of Pope Gregory XIII's gate, the Porta San Giovanni, dense masses of cloud—dark grey and tinged with a coppery glow along their rims—were filling the sky to north and west of the city. A low grumbling of still distant thunder was borne, too, now and then, to Fiordelisa's ears, from far across the northern Campagna, as she leaned back in her seat, her eyes closed in a last endeavour to rally her rather scattered fac-

ulties to her aid before arriving upon the field of battle. For such was the aspect in which Palazzo Bordelacqua now presented itself to her.

The first object to be achieved, the girl resolved, was that of satisfying herself as to Giacinto's real condition; and that could only be effected either by a personal meeting with him, or, if, as she feared, that were to prove impossible, then by means of a clandestine exchange of letters between them. But, in any case, she felt sure that if her uncle were to discover the fact of her intention, it would mean irretrievable disaster, since, by now, she had come to look upon Prince Bordelacqua as the one person supremely to be circumvented at all costs. Never, for one moment, if it could be helped, must he be let to have so much as even a glimmering of the truth—unless, indeed, her whole intuition regarding him were to prove unfounded and she were clearly shown to have done him an injustice. But, if it were not he who was to be held accountable for her separation from Giacinto, then with whom had she to do in the matter?—always supposing, of course, that Giacinto had been wrongfully removed from his rightful place as the eldest son of the House?

There was no one else—there could be no one else, she argued, besides Giacinto's father. And having decided this point, Fiordelisa opened her eyes wide to look out at the sombre bulk of a basil-

ica, that of San Giovanni Laterano, to this day the parish church of the world—"Head and mother of all the churches of the city and of the whole earth," as it was styled. On the right nearly facing it, is the Scala Santa, the building in which are the steps spotted with the blood of the Redeemer and brought by the crusaders from the palace of Pilate in Jerusalem. Once, on the Good Friday in the year of her marriage, Fiordelisa had been taken by Tressinella in this same coach to the house of the Scala Santa, and she had never forgotten the impression made upon her by the spectacle of the crowds of people going up the twenty-eight steps on their knees to the "Sanctum Sanctorum" or Holy of Holies, as the old private chapel of the popes was called.

When she had last seen the place the day had been rather cold but bright and gladsome with the sun of a late Roman spring; the air had been peculiarly sweet, too, with the perfume of thousands of violets in the neighboring gardens. But now it looked forlorn and severe, deserted save for a few beggars who were huddled in the entrance, shrinking from the wind that threatened to strip them of their rags. So long was it since Fiordelisa had set her eyes upon any such unfortunates that, at first sight, she uttered a cry of pity as the nearest of them ran towards the coach, holding out his hat for alms. She would have liked to give him something, but she had nothing

about her to give. Never, in all her life, had she ever had a single piece of money in her pocket, except when, on Sundays and feast days, a gold "scudo" had been handed to her by her father or Prince Bordelacqua to be spent in charity. And so she found herself obliged to lean back in the shadows in order to hide her confusion and distress. Moreover, she was conscious of anger in herself at the thought of being still deprived of all administration of her own affairs; and with the remembrance of her helpless dependence upon Prince Bordelacqua's good will and pleasure, in even so small a matter as that of almsgiving, a wave of something akin to actual hatred of him came over Fiordelisa. The sense of his domination was becoming almost unbearable to her as she sat there in the close-smelling coach, her eyes lowered in shame while the beggar's curses died away behind her and he skipped back to avoid a blow from the flat of Stürmli's broadsword.

On, up the Via San Giovanni in Laterano, went the great carriage with its escort of a single horseman; past the neglected church of San Clemente—long ages were yet to elapse before it was discovered that, beneath the building was another church, a basilica of the ancient Christians, the whole built over other and still more ancient Roman remains—and so out into the space of waste land about the Coliseum. Never, as it seemed to Fiordelisa, had

the vast shell of the amphitheatre struck so sharply on her imagination as it did this sunless summer forenoon. Generally, there had been a certain play of light and shade in and out, among the many upper perforations of the walls, but to-day the Coliseum was all one lifeless grey with the sky, except where the countless holes, bored in the Middle Ages for the purpose of extracting the iron bolts and clamps that had once held the blocks of stone together, showed black against the rough surface of travertine. For, in the years when the Frangipani and others used the Coliseum itself as a private fortress, the iron, which could be made into armour, was more precious almost than bread and meat to such feudal families and their retainers.

But Fiordelisa had little inclination to amuse herself with looking out at the view; instead, now that she was drawing near Palazzo Bordelacqua, the need for summoning all her available fortitude, and for rallying her will to cope with the problems that awaited her there, demanded the putting of everything else out of her mind.

She wondered whether she would find Salvatore Gozzoli in the palace or not; the fact of Stürmli's having been sent to fetch her from Castel Gandolfo seemed to imply that Gozzoli was no longer in the service of her uncle, and for this Fiordelisa was sorry, because Gozzoli, as she remembered, had

been a partisan of Giacinto's in days gone by. The only intimate friend, therefore, upon whom the girl felt she could absolutely rely to help her in establishing communication with Giacinto was Teresinella. But as Fiordelisa had heard nothing of Teresinella for so long, she could not help fearing that the latter had been removed upon some pretext or other to a distance, by Prince Bordelacqua's orders. With every minute that now brought her further into her uncle's power, Fiordelisa's misgivings increased a hundred-fold, until at last a sort of panic of uncertainty seized her, making her clasp her hands tightly on her breast and pray with desperate energy for help against her enemy—whosoever that enemy might eventually be shown to be. All the same, she had scarcely any doubt but that it was Prince Bordelacqua himself and none other against whom she was about to pit herself in the fight for Giacinto. And, if she were to prove the conqueror in that fight, Fiordelisa's feminine instinct told her one thing plainly—that she must contrive at all costs to dissemble her intentions and conceal her purpose from the first moment of meeting with her uncle until such a time as she should have finally outwitted and defeated him. A single mistake, she knew, and the battle would be lost, probably beyond possibility of retrieval, and with what consequences to Giacinto—for whom she was far

more concerned than for herself—she dared not think, since something told her that if necessary and if such were his intention, Prince Bordelacqua would shrink from no expedient, however terrible, in order to keep her husband and herself apart forever. She did not know, of course, anything of what had taken place in Palazzo Bordelacqua since her marriage, beyond what Donna Olimpia had seen fit to tell her—namely, that the Princess was dead and that Giacinto had lost his reason and had been placed under restraint on that account; but ever since the night when the Abbess had sent for her to break the news of her husband's madness, Fiordelisa's belief in Giacinto's sanity had only grown firmer with the passing of the weary months and years; so that it had become a part of her innate belief in all things good and beautiful and natural, and their inevitable ultimate victory over all that was base and hurtful and ugly in the scheme of creation.

And so she went on praying and plotting, her hands fallen to her lap and her fingers intertwined tightly, so that the knuckles were all white and bloodless with the strain.

“O, Monsignore Saint George, come now to the help of a Christian wife! Come, for the love of Heaven—and for the honour of your shrine, at home in the Veneto”—she entreated, as the coach rolled slowly into the courtyard of the palace from

the Lungara. Presently it drew up; and then the door was opened for Fiordelisa to alight by Pio Sacchetti in person, who happened to be passing from the office on his way to the street.

“Your most excellent Grace, I have the honour to salute you,” he said, bowing low and holding his hat upon his heart. “May I beg the privilege?” offering an arm to assist her to the ground.

But Fiordelisa only acknowledged his greeting with an inclination of her head and stepped down without accepting his proffered help. As she did so, a page, who had marked her arrival from a window of the guardroom, hastened out to greet her. He was not one whom she had seen before; for all those pages who had been attached to Casa Bordelacqua at the time of her wedding had since grown up and been replaced by others. Still, he knew that it could only be Donna Fiordelisa who came thus in the Prince’s own coach, escorted by Stürmli. Close upon the page’s heels followed the old “maestro di casa,” Sebastiano Torelli, who had completely won Fiordelisa’s heart in days gone by with surreptitious offerings of sweetmeats. On catching sight of her now, as she crossed the colonnade towards the entrance, Sebastiano ran forward and covered the hand extended to him with kisses. And then, so that none but she could hear:

“Blessed be this day!” he murmured. “Oh, my dear little Excellency—but to what a house have you returned!”

And Fiordelisa, feeling the tears rising to her eyes, passed on, without being able to speak, up the great staircase to where someone was awaiting her at the top. It was no other than Prince Bordelacqua himself, who stood there to meet her, his tall, black-clad figure looking even more gaunt and forbidding than ever in a ray of sickly sunlight that fell across it from a neighboring window. His head was bowed a little, with the dark face thrown forward somewhat; of his hands, one held a white rose, while the other rested on his sword, a thumb hooked over the iron quillon of it.

“You are welcome, my daughter,”—as Fiordelisa drew near. “I trust you are enjoying good health? I am truly thankful to hear it,” on her answering with an almost inaudible affirmative, as she reached the landing and sank into a curtsey before him. Raising her, Prince Bordelacqua touched her forehead with his lips and then stepped back to the doorway whence he had issued.

“I shall see you again later,” he said. “Doubtless you would prefer now to rest awhile after your journey. Sebastiano will conduct you to your apartment, where you will find everything in readiness.” And so saying, he left her, with a smile intended to

convey the assurance of his unchanging paternal affection.

“The Prince,” whispered Sebastiano to Fiordelisa as they continued on their way, “is become very retiring in his habits of late years. We rarely have the pleasure of seeing him amongst us now-a-days. But, doubtless, your Grace’s return to *Casa Borde-lacqua* will have a beneficial effect upon his spirits.”

And he nodded confidentially.

The rooms to which he now led Fiordelisa were the same that she had previously occupied with Teresinella. There were two of them, looking out to the west, over the hills that lay between Rome and the buffalo-haunted marshes of Maccarese. The rooms opened into each other and there was no way of reaching the second of them except through the first and smaller of the two, that in which Teresinella had been used to sleep. The furniture and fittings of both were of the simplest, such as still obtain in the bedrooms of Roman ladies of a certain school; there was, of course, no fireplace in either room or even a strip of carpet over the bare, red tiles of the floor. Everything was meticulously clean and gave rather the impression of a hospital than of the sleeping place of a young and wealthy noblewoman.

“Behold, your Grace——” and Sebastiano stood aside from the door with a wave of the hand; but his

eyes fell before those of Fiordelisa, as she stared at him incredulously.

At sight of the familiar rooms, a cold fury, stronger than herself, had come over Fiordelisa, rendering her insensible to the consequences of anything she might say or do. For she understood why these rooms had been allotted to her instead of those which, as the wife of Prince Bordelacqua's eldest son, she would, in the ordinary course of things, have shared with her husband. She understood, as by the gleam of a sudden illumination cast upon her understanding, that she was meant to look upon herself henceforth as being freed from the ties of marriage with Giacinto by the fact of his mental infirmity—rather than believe in which she would have preferred to die. And, with each succeeding second of silence, her anger grew more overpowering. Her whole instinct told her that to surrender this point of the rooms would be to betray the cause of Giacinto.

“What does this mean?” she demanded of Sebastiano. “This was where I slept as a little girl. As a wife, in the house of my husband—even if he be absent for the time being through ill-health—I insist upon occupying the apartment which is ours, Don Giacinto’s and mine by every right. Until my rightful chamber has been prepared, I am willing to make use of these, during to-day. But I will

not sleep in either of them a single hour. You may tell the Prince of my intention."

Sebastiano could only stutter his apologies for "the mistake," as he thought best to call it. But he knew, as well as did Fiordelisa, that it had been made on purpose, in order that it might enter like the thin end of a wedge into her comprehension.

Inside the first of the rooms two maids were standing ready to receive their mistress. Both of them were strangers to Fiordelisa. They must have heard, it struck her, every word of what she had been saying to Sebastiano; for the door was wide open and her voice had been raised.

"Most excellent Lady—your servant," they both murmured rather confusedly, being by no means sure of the temper of this astonishing young woman who sent such imperious messages to Prince Bordelacqua. But at once, on seeing the pretty, white-faced girl, draped in conventional black, who had crossed the threshold and was regarding them as though appealing for sympathy and comfort, their hearts warmed towards her. While one of them closed the door the other began to take off Fiordelisa's cloak.

At first, it seemed only too probable to Fiordelisa that, in Palazzo Bordelacqua, she would be surrounded by enemies on every hand. If any doubts of the Prince's responsibility for Giacinto's removal had lingered in her mind hitherto, the incident of

the wrong rooms had almost completely dispelled the last remnant of them. She was all but morally convinced that, in some way or other, the brains and will at work behind the whole business had been those of Prince Bordelacqua and of no one else. If such a suspicion appeared too utterly preposterous at one moment, the next it returned to her with redoubled persistence. Come what might, she told herself, she would move Heaven and earth to unmask and frustrate the whole diabolical intrigue—if such indeed it were. And with that “if” others followed fast and thick; “if” Giacinto were still alive and “if” he were not really hopelessly insane.

And, at the thought, she was constrained to rise from the chair into which she had sunk and to cross to the window, out of which she leaned a moment to let the smell of the fast browning magnolia petals in the garden below revive her with its insidious fragrance.

And so the first outlines of the course before her began to show themselves dimly to Fiordelisa. Coming round from the window, she went back to the chair and sat down in it again.

“What is your name?” she asked of the nearest of her attendants. “So—Curletti? and you are sisters, you say?”

“We are twins, Lady,” the girl explained. “I am Giulietta and this is Maria”—indicating her

companion with a smile of expectant amusement as she marked the rising perplexity in Fiordelisa's expression.

"But how is one to tell you apart? You are each the living image of the other!"

Even Fiordelisa was beginning to smile. Despite her sorrow the humourous difficulty of the situation appealed irresistibly to her natural sense of humour. After all, they were three girls together with no tiresome elders to keep them from making friends between themselves. Seeing the smile that dimpled in Fiordelisa's face, the twins broke into a little laugh of delight at her bewilderment.

"If you will deign to observe, Lady, you will see that there is a difference in the way we do our shawls," said Giulietta, pointing to the linen neckerchief folded upon her breast. "Mine I fold with the right side over the left, and Maria here with the left over the right."

"I see." Fiordelisa felt an unexpected confidence begin to take the place of her first distrust of the two girls. So frankly guileless and incapable of treachery were they, that their innocence of any kind of collusion with the suspected enemy was amply self-evident. "Tell me," she went on, "of what country are you, Giulietta? You are not of the parts near Rome, I think, because you do not speak quite like a Roman?"

"We are of Anagni," answered Giulietta. "It was his lordship, the Bishop, Don Lorenzo Bordonacqua, who obtained for us the happiness of entering your Excellency's service. We are orphans—and may Don Lorenzo, some day, become our Pope!"

"That is a good wish," said Fiordelisa. "And now I must prepare to wait upon the Prince in case he sends to desire my attendance."

Half an hour later, when Fiordelisa had completed her toilet with the help of the twins, and was reading her book of Hours, as she had been taught to do at the convent, there came a knock on the door. Running to it, Maria Curletti exchanged a few words with someone outside and then closed it again.

"One of the young gentlemen," she reported, "to say that, if convenient to your Excellency, the Signor Principe would be happy to see you in his library."

"Say that I fly to obey the Signor Principe's kind command," said Fiordelisa, paling a trifle, in spite of her courage, at the recollection of her own recent message to her father-in-law.

Preceded by the page, she left her room and traversed the palace to the opposite wing, where

Prince Bordelacqua lived in solitary state. When they came to the door where a halberdier was lounging against the wall, the man sprang smartly to attention and saluted Fiordelisa with his glittering weapon, whilst her companion opened the door and raised the edge of the curtain within.

“The most noble lady, Donna Fiordelisa Bordelacqua,” he announced scarcely above a whisper, as though he were in a church.

The Prince was seated, reading a book propped up on a small lectern on a table halfway down the long room from the door. As Fiordelisa entered, he placed a marker between the pages of the book and closed it carefully with both hands. Then he turned in his chair and regarded his visitor with a look of tolerant admiration. He did not speak all at once, but waited until she had come within a couple of yards of him.

“Dear child, but you are grown very beautiful,” he said at last. “Do you know that?” he asked suddenly. “Ah, well! it is only natural that you should—I say it is only natural. And now, what is this they tell me—that you are displeased with my poor efforts to make you feel at home here? Come, sit down beside me and tell me all about it, Fiordelisa,”—motioning her to a seat near his own.

This opening, so to speak, of the Prince’s was just what Fiordelisa had been most dreading. If

he had spoken angrily, she would have replied to him in kind, as she had been prepared to do; for there would have been nothing easier for her than to break into a passion in the course of which she might have spoken her whole mind to him. But, from this mistake, although she did not see it until afterwards, she was fortunately preserved. Otherwise, it might have gone very hard, not only for herself, but for Giacinto as well. As it was, she could only stammer a few halting words to the effect that no doubt the error in regard to her rooms had occurred through some oversight of the steward's, but that—

Seeing her embarrassment, Prince Bordelacqua laid a hand upon Fiordelisa's and fetched a sigh of commiseration.

“I understand, I perfectly understand,” he assured her. “You expected, of course, to find other rooms prepared for you—those allotted by custom to the eldest son of the House and his wife. And, consequently, you were disappointed—even hurt, shall we say, dear daughter?—by what must have appeared to you as an intentional slight. Nothing could have been further from my intention. But when I tell you the reason you will see the force of it for yourself. Next week—God willing—we leave Rome for Acquanera. It seemed hardly worth while for so short a time. The expense of doing up

the larger rooms would have been a considerable one, in any case, and just at this moment I have several heavy calls upon my purse—matters of urgent charity and so forth, which admit of no delay. You understand?—‘He gives doubly who gives at once,’ as says the proverb. So I ventured to hope you would have no objection to wait until we return here in the Autumn. Am I forgiven, Fiordelisa *mia?*”—stroking her hand lingeringly.

There was nothing more, as Fiordelisa saw, to be said upon the question of the rooms, now that he had put it thus plausibly upon the basis of charitable necessity and common sense. She had no choice but to show herself amenable to both. But she was not going to abandon the opportunity of proclaiming herself the wife of Don Giacinto Bordelacqua, and of challenging an attack upon her right to that title.

“It is rather for me to crave pardon of your Highness for my stupidity,” she said. “As you say, it will be time enough for me to occupy the other rooms in the Autumn—when I shall hope to do so with my husband.”

At this, Prince Bordelacqua’s eyes narrowed slightly. Removing his hand from Fiordelisa’s he leaned back in his chair, a look of deprecation on his face.

“Excuse me if I seem to have overlooked your natural anxiety for news of our poor Giacinto,” he

replied. "To tell you the truth, I have been trying to find some way, for both our sakes, of approaching the subject as gently as possible. But what shall I say? I can only remind you, dear daughter, of our common duty of resignation to the decrees of Providence—and of faith that all is for the best."

"Do you mean that——?" Fiordelisa began, in a tone so harsh with fear that it sounded like that of a stranger. She could not finish the question, but only sat there as though turned to stone, stricken with a pitiful dumbness that would have softened any heart less relentless than that of the man who was watching her as a cat might watch a mouse.

"No; he is not dead—poor Giacinto!" said the Prince at last, as if to imply that death would have been almost preferable for Giacinto as a release from his miserable state. "But his condition has been growing steadily worse. His intervals of calm are shorter and rarer; his attacks of rage increase in frequency and duration from day to day. What can I say to console you, Fiordelisa? I hardly know. True, certain possibilities have suggested themselves to me, but——" And he fondled his chin thoughtfully.

Fiordelisa was conscious of two things. The first was an indescribable exulting in the great central fact of Giacinto's being alive. The second was the knowledge that, for the fraction of a second, a spark

of anger had leapt out at her from Prince Bordelacqua's eyes—of anger and of something else; but of what, precisely, she could not tell, whether of avarice or slyness or fear.

Yes—or fear? But of what? Of her not believing his story?

And, as the notion was borne in upon Fiordelisa, she lowered her glance quickly, lest he should read in it something of what was passing in her mind.

But there was more to follow. Presently he continued:

“I think the time has come, Fiordelisa, for you to become acquainted with certain particulars in respect to Giacinto's illness. Painful as it is for me to be obliged to recall them, none the less I must do violence to all my inclinations both as a father and—and a widower.”

He paused; as he did so there came up to Fiordelisa through the open window, a raucous cry from the Lungara below. A pieman was going by, calling his wares lustily. Prince Bordelacqua waited for the noise to pass, drumming with his fingers, the while, on the arm of his chair, before resuming:

“What I am going to tell you must remain forever a secret between us. Besides Giacinto himself, it is known only to four persons—our Holy Father the Pope, Don Bartolomeo Prinetti, my son Cesare and myself.” Here, again, his eyebrows drew to-

gether, as though in displeasure at some vexatious uncertainty. "Swear to me that you will forever maintain silence upon it, before I go further, Fiordelisa. I ask it of you for the honour of our family."

"I swear to do so," said Fiordelisa, trembling a little in the new terror with which these sinister preliminaries inspired her. "What is it? Oh, what is it?"

"It is this—summon all your courage to bear it,—Giacinto is a matricide. He killed his mother, my wife—he killed her with his sword. He tried to kill me, his father, too. See—" turning back a sleeve and laying bare his wrist with the scar on it. "Now do you understand why I have to put my son away where he can do no hurt to himself or to anyone else—to you, for instance?"

During several minutes Fiordelisa sat quite still, her eyes fixed on the scar, trying to rally her faculties under the terrific blow of Prince Bordelacqua's words.

"I will not believe it—I will not believe it. It is not true—it is not true!" she kept on telling herself, the while she sat there, tongue-tied and sick at heart. Now, at least, she knew the worst; and so she set to striking a mental balance between her gain and loss. The knowledge that Giacinto was alive,—that and her self-taught disbelief of years in his father's justice or good will towards him,—stood for the gains.

Over against these she had to set for loss nothing but Prince Bordelacqua's unsupported statement as to Giacinto's crime and madness.

As once before, the sum of her reflections amounted to no more than this: that nothing should prevent her from finding out the truth by the use of her own wit and courage and fortitude.

Suddenly she became aware of the Prince's impatience for some kind of a response from her and she gave him one at random.

"It is hard on you," she said dully, for she was far more scared and stunned by what he had told her than she would admit to herself.

"Yes, it is hard on me," rejoined Prince Bordelacqua. "It has ruined my life—that you can understand, Fiordelisa. Still, as you see, I am perfectly resigned."

"May I ask a question?" said Fiordelisa. "Would it not be possible for me to see Giacinto from time to time? Might it not, even, perhaps do him good to be able to talk to me a little, occasionally?"

"Ah, indeed, I fear me that that is impossible, dear daughter! The least excitement might have the most disastrous consequences in his present condition. But make your mind easy as to his comfort. He is being treated with every indulgence and care. He is not alone; Don Bartolomeo Prinetti has been

with him all along as his companion. A most excellent, self-sacrificing man is Don Bartolomeo. I really do not know what we should have done without him. And Giacinto is quite devoted to him—poor boy!"

"Is Giacinto, then, here, in the palace?" asked Fiordelisa.

"No, no; he is not here. But I think it would be better that we should talk of other things for a while. You have had to undergo a great shock, as is plainly visible and was only to be expected. No, no—positively, I must refuse to discuss the matter further with you at present. One thing only I ought to tell you in order to save you from any needless disappointment in the future—Giacinto will never get any better as time goes on. His case is quite hopeless, and all we can do is to try to spare him as much suffering as is humanly possible. I want you, if you can, not to let your thoughts dwell upon so sad a subject, but to put it out of your mind gradually—if you cannot do so all at once—and to live your life as though my poor Giacinto never came into it."

"I cannot forget Giacinto, if that is what you mean," said Fiordelisa. "But I will try not to depress others with my trouble."

"Ah well, you are very young yet—and time, as we know, works wonders. We shall see—we shall see——"

And the Prince rose, as though to intimate that the interview was at an end.

“By the way, I have made arrangements for a duenna to keep you company,” he remarked. “Unfortunately, the lady has fallen ill and will not be able to take up her duties, in all probability, until the Autumn. Until then, you will, of course, keep to the house and grounds, both here and at Acquanera, except when you are obliged to pass beyond them—on Sundays, for example, in order to go to church—when one of the maids will attend you, together with the good Sacchetti.”

On leaving her father-in-law, Fiordelisa went down the stairs and passed along under the colonnade, with the intention of making a noon-day visit to the Chapel, as she had been wont to do at Castel Gandolfo. As she walked she stumbled almost blindly, more than once, owing to the tears that dimmed her vision; try as she would, she could no longer keep them back and so they chased each other down her cheeks unrestrainedly.

She was on the point of crossing the courtyard when a tall, slim boy, came out under the archway leading to the stables, and then stood still, right in front of her. For a second they confronted one another unrecognisingly, until Don Cesare’s pretty teeth showed in a smile of welcome.

“ Sister mine,” he cried, “ Fiordelisa—do you not know me? Have you forgotten Cesare? ”

“ But, indeed, I hardly knew you—you are so big, so tall,” she excused herself as well as she could. “ Oh, but I am truly glad to see you again, dear brother,”—as she returned his embrace—“ so very, very glad! If you only knew how I have been longing to come back, all these years, from the convent——! ”

“ And from Aunt Olimpia, too, I will wager,”—with a ringing laugh. “ I intend no disrespect to our revered relative, but, by Bacchus! it must have been anything but gay for you in that holy house of hers! ”

“ Ah, do not make sport of Aunt Olimpia, Cesare dear,” Fiordelisa rebuked him gently. “ She has been an angel of goodness to me. If it had not been for her, I do not like to think what would have become of me ever since—since—— ”

He understood, and instantly, his manner changed. Also he could not help noting that she had been crying, and he had no difficulty in divining the cause of it.

“ I know—ever since certain—things took place,” he returned. “ But let us not spoil the pleasure of our meeting by harking back to them. Speaking for myself, I cannot bear to think about them—because there is nothing that I or anyone else can do to

make them any different. Let us agree that we will help each other to forget them, shall we, Fiordelisa?"

And as she had answered Prince Bordelacqua, so she now answered Cesare:

"I cannot forget Giacinto," she said. "But you shall always find me cheerful, Cesare. I promise not to let you see me crying again; but when you came upon me I had only just learned the whole truth from your father. Until now, it had been kept from me—in mercy, I suppose."

Don Cesare could only turn away his head and shift his weight uncomfortably from one foot to the other. He was not wanting in affection for his brother, but somehow, the tragedy that had led to that brother's seclusion and removal had seemed to place an impassable barrier between them, so that even the thought of Giacinto was dreadful to Cesare.

Before he could find the words of encouragement that he was seeking, with which to alleviate his own and Fiordelisa's distress, however, she forestalled him.

"I am going into the Chapel for a little," she went on, more composedly. "But, perhaps, you may have already made your visit to the Tabernacle?"—forgetting for the instant that she was not speaking to one of the nuns at Castel Gandolfo. "Until later, then."

Drawing away from him, she took leave of Don Cesare with a brave smile and passed on into the well remembered Chapel. Save for herself, it was empty. There was no one there to see her grief and she might surrender to it without shame. Scarcely pausing at the door, she went straight to the marble Altar-rail and sank upon her knees before it, while the waters roared over her soul.

She did not—because she dared not—believe that Giacinto had killed his mother, as Prince Bordelacqua had said. But she was terrified lest, in time, she might come to be persuaded of it. And so she prayed desperately for faith and constancy sufficient to preserve her from such a thing; and for the strength of purpose necessary to give her the victory over her insidious foe.

Nevertheless, the plain facts were awful in their very simplicity. Princess Bordelacqua had been killed, and the Prince himself wounded apparently, in attempting to defend her. If Giacinto was to be proved innocent before the whole world, then someone else would have to be proved guilty. And even if she felt no doubt of Giacinto's innocence—what about his alleged insanity? For the oft-repeated statement of it was beginning to work upon her; and, as she realised this, Fiordelisa's prayer for help became an agony.

CHAPTER VIII

How long she remained there, kneeling at the Altar-rail, Fiordelisa did not know. It might have been only a few minutes or half an hour or even more, so lost was she for the time being to everything except the sharpness of her suffering and the need of obtaining light upon her path.

It was not possible for her to put her entreaty into words, because there were no words to express what she felt—all she could do was done by a silent submission of her case and Giacinto's to the judgment of Heaven, a mute appeal for justice, which, somehow, she knew at once had been heard and answered as soon as it had left her.

Although she had caught no sound of footsteps she became suddenly conscious of the fact that someone was watching her intently from behind; whereupon she rose up from her knees and came round, to see that a woman was standing in the doorway of the Chapel, holding up the leather curtain with one hand as though she had been brought to a halt in the act of entering by her unwillingness to trespass further upon Fiordelisa's seclusion.

“Oh, great God—it is indeed she herself!” Fiordelisa heard her whisper as she let fall the curtain

behind her and came forward into the sunlight. And Fiordelisa, seeing her, uttered a low cry of amazement and thankfulness:

“Teresinella!”

Moving swiftly, she went down the Chapel, and the next moment she was being kissed and caressed and comforted again, as in the old days, by the woman who had come so far to seek her. For, as Teresinella presently explained when the first rapture of their meeting was over, she had travelled all the way from Lombardy in order to be in Rome on the day of her foster-child’s return from Castel Gandolfo; the date of which she had marked for their reunion from the moment of her leaving Casa Bordelacqua for her own country four years before.

“Let us talk here, awhile, where no one will disturb us, flower of my heart,” she said, guiding Fiordelisa to a chair and seating herself on another beside her. “But what is this?”—peering more closely into the girl’s tear-stained face. “You have been crying—is it not so?” And then, with rising distrust of their surroundings, as the memory of her former apprehension at the time of Fiordelisa’s wedding came back to her increased a thousandfold: “What have they been doing to you, among them? And where is your husband—why is not Don Giacinto with you at the hour of your return to him from the convent?”

'At first, Fiordelisa could only throw her arms around Teresinella's neck and lean upon her, her own breath coming and going in dry sobs that seemed as though they were rending her; at last, however, the other contrived to calm her a little, so that she could bring herself to speak.

"He is not here—I do not know where he is—" she said. "They have put him away in some place that they will not tell me of. They say it is because, because—oh, I cannot say it, it is too hateful—"

"They? the Prince, do you mean? But why has he put away his son? Tell me about it. I know nothing of what has passed here in Rome since I went away, except what I heard on the road—that the Lady Princess has been dead these five years. May she rest in peace! But as to Don Giacinto, they told me nothing. Speak, then, beloved; open your heart to me that I may understand."

Thus adjured, Fiordelisa told all she knew, saving only what Prince Bordelacqua had made her swear not to tell as to Giacinto's having killed his mother. When she had finished, Teresinella sat silent for a time, her knees wide apart and her hands fallen in her lap, with bowed head and eyes that were staring down vacantly at her dusty shoes, as if she were stupefied by the girl's story.

As a matter of fact, however, Teresinella was

only trying to see what she felt sure there was to be seen somewhere in the tangled net-work of things as placed before her by Fiordelisa.

At last, without raising her head, she said as though speaking to herself:

“If Don Giacinto is not somewhere here in Palazzo Bordelacqua itself, then it is certain that he is either at Acquanera or else in some place not far from there——”

Fiordelisa was about to interrupt with a question, when Teresinella pursued:

“That is what I must do first; to find out where Don Giacinto is. After that—well, we shall see. Don Bartolomeo, did you say, is with Don Giacinto? Then you may be sure that they are not in the city. I shall find out where they are, though, before I go back home.”

“You are not going away again, are you, to leave me here all alone?” asked Fiordelisa swiftly, taking her by the arm.

“I must,” replied Teresinella. “There are certain reasons, you understand. Also, I came here without asking the permission of Pio Sacchetti—who would certainly have refused it. I have no friends any more now in Casa Bordelacqua. What I would ask is: What would you and Don Giacinto do if he could be delivered from his father’s hands and you were both free to go where you liked? Would you

go back to Lombardy? I think you would be safe there."

"Yes, we would go to Lombardy, to San Michele," said Fiordelisa. "We would not come back to Rome, because of Prince Bordelacqua; he has too much power for us to be able to resist him here. But I must know quickly if Don Giacinto is really demented or not; otherwise, I shall go mad myself. Can you find that out for me, Teresinella?"

"I will do my best. But, then, I must meet you again in order to tell you. And I think it would be better that I should not come to Palazzo Bordelacqua again, or Sor Pio might notice it and bring me before the Prince to be questioned as to my being here without leave. So I will be waiting for you near by, in the church of Sant' Onofrio, a week from to-day, towards Vespers."

"I will be there," said Fiordelisa, "but we shall have to be careful, because I shall not be alone. It may be that Pio Sacchetti will be sent to accompany me. If so——"

"If so, then this is what we will do—you must take no notice of me and I will take care to keep out of Sor Pio's way. I shall be where it is dark, by the door, with my back turned away from it. If I am standing it will mean that all is well—that I do not think Don Giacinto is mad, and that when I get back to San Michele I will send you a man who will

deliver Don Giacinto and will bring you both home. If, on the other hand, you see me kneeling, then you will understand that—that——”

She broke off with a gesture full of sorrow and gathered Fiordelisa once more to her; thus they remained a short while, until Teresinella whispered that she must be going.

“ I saw you come in here, from the gateway into the Lungara,” she said. “ I meant to have waited about until I could get a chance of speaking with you and of telling you how we all long to have our dear little lady back with us at San Michele. Then I would have started to return there as soon as possible. But now, I will first go instead to Acquanera; only, remember to be in Sant’ Onofrio at the time and on the day appointed. And now—farewell. Have no fears—I will not fail you, little flower of my soul.”

And so saying, she stole delicately away out of the Chapel, leaving Fiordelisa to think over her next meeting with Prince Bordelacqua and Don Cesare at the midday meal. Presently, as she rose to leave the Chapel, the report of the noontide cannon from the Castle of Sant’ Angelo rolled out across the town; forthwith, she knelt again to say the “ Angelus,” before going into the sunny courtyard, where a flock of pigeons was being fed by a groom from a bag of maize. As she stood there, watching them,

a pair of the large black horses—than which Prince Bordelacqua would have no others in his stables—came dancing through the inner archway of the courtyard, in charge of the coachman who rode one and led its fellow; he was taking them for their daily exercise along the streets and through the Porta Nomentana, into the open country, where he would walk them for a few miles in the direction of Monte Rotondo, before bringing them back again to draw the family coach round the city in the late afternoon. On nearing Fiordelisa they shied away from the fluttering pigeons and sent a shower of sand flying among the birds that rose into the air with a whirring of wings; so that the picture was destroyed, and the girl moved away towards the great main staircase of the palace, a host of memories assailing her as she went.

She felt the more lonely by reason of those memories; the recollection of her marriage day and all its now ravished hopes and dreams seemed to haunt the wide stairs and to look out at her from the faces of the statues set in hollows along the walls. It was here that Giacinto had pressed her hand so tenderly in his own and had whispered his first words of love as they went up to the banquet, when the whole world had combined in flattering promises to them both of its undying favour and service. Not that Fiordelisa asked anything of the

world beyond the restoration to her of the boy husband whom she loved so faithfully despite their long separation; if only she could get him back, she thought, she would gladly give up everything else she possessed. With what tremulous eagerness would she not await the return of Teresinella from Acquanera—how supreme would be her joy if she were to see her standing upright by the door of Sant' Onofrio!

The very swiftness with which Teresinella had come and gone away again made Fiordelisa's brief glimpse of her now seem almost unreal. But Fiordelisa knew the ways of her own people and knew that with them, as Goths, the business in hand came first before all things; whereas, with the people of Latium, it more usually came last.

Since his wife's death and Giacinto's absence, Prince Bordelacqua had had his meals served to him in a smaller room off the banqueting hall which had formerly been the family dining-room; the windows of this smaller room looked over the Lungara, so that the noonday sun fell full upon the walls which were hung with tapestry, and on a red and green Turkey rug covering the polished marble of the floor. When Fiordelisa entered there she found the Prince already awaiting her, together with Ce-

sare, who was standing near one of the windows playing with an ivory cup and ball the while his father regarded him speculatively from where he sat at the table.

As the girl came towards him, her father-in-law rose to meet her; taking her by the hand, he led her towards Cesare.

“ You two are all that remain to me,” he said. “ We three must henceforth hold fast to one another, so let us agree to have no misunderstanding among us. Now kiss your sister, Cesare, and do you kiss your brother, Fiordelisa—and may Heaven bless and guide you both in all things! ”—raising his hands over them a moment, as though in benediction.

In the course of the meal which followed, Prince Bordelacqua led the conversation round gradually to the subject of Fiordelisa herself and her residence in the convent; inquiring solicitously after the health of his sister and as to whether Donna Olimpia’s community had of late received the honour of a visit as usual from the Pope, who had already been some time at his summer palace at Castel Gandolfo.

“ His Holiness has not yet been to see Aunt Olimpia,” replied Fiordelisa. “ Indeed, it is said that he is hardly well enough in these days to leave the palace.”

“ I have heard something of the kind,” said Prince

Bordelacqua, "but I cannot believe there is anything serious the matter with him. Of course, he is no longer young, but his constitution is magnificent. Depend upon it, we shall yet see him in Saint Peter's as vigorous as ever."

For the Prince had no desire for the death of Pope Clement, who, as Cardinal, had shown the greatest sympathy for him at the time of his wife's death and had approved of Giacinto's incarceration; moreover, Clement XI, since his election to the Pontificate, being fully satisfied as to Giacinto's mental derangement, had more than once rejected the petition of the Bishop of Anagni to the effect that the young man might be restored to his place as the heir of Casa Bordelacqua in view of the improvement in his condition.

"There is plenty of time for that," the Pontiff had replied. "If Don Giacinto Bordelacqua be, as you say, on the highroad to a complete recovery, then let him finish the journey. After that, well, we will see what can be done. Obviously, since the treatment to which he has been subjected has done him so much good already, it can do him no harm to continue with it for a while longer."

As Prince Bordelacqua saw clearly, if Fiordelisa were to marry Don Cesare, her marriage with Giacinto must first be annulled by a decree of the Pope; and such a decree could not be pronounced without a

further thorough examination into Giacinto's condition by the papal medical authorities, so that the Sovereign Pontiff might be once more fully informed in regard to it before giving his decision in the matter. Hence, that day of Fiordelisa's return, Prince Bordelacqua was considerably exercised as to what lay next before him. Either he must contrive to obtain an annulment without Giacinto's being examined—since nothing, according to Don Bartolomeo's reports could possibly appear in the course of such an examination to justify Giacinto's further detention as being of unsound mind—or else—what?

But here the Prince's imagination was obliged to pause.

CHAPTER IX

A SOFT night-breeze stirred the triple flames of the three-wick'd lamp on the table, and Don Bartolomeo Prinetti rose to shut the grated window.

Opposite to him sat Don Giacinto Bordelacqua, his elbows on the table, his chin resting in the palms of his hands. His face, no longer that of a boy, was the face of a man who had been in the power of a sworn tormentor—as an expert torturer was called—his complexion grey with anguish and his eyes unnaturally bright and feverish. Needless to say, it was not Don Bartolomeo who had tortured him.

As he watched the priest cross the room, an oath escaped Giacinto :

“ By Heavens! I will make an end of it! ”—flinging forward a hand upon the table. “ Either I am let to go back among the living or I will put myself out of my misery. And, if that is what it is to be, who shall blame me? ”

Don Bartolomeo, having closed the window, returned to the table where he stood, regarding his friend compassionately.

“ But as for me, I do not think that that is what it is to be, Giacinto, ” he said. “ Speaking for my-

self, I have the firmest conviction that all will yet come right for you. Have patience yet a little while. Already matters are beginning to improve. Is it not something that your uncle Don Lorenzo has promised me to see what can be done towards——”

“ Uncle Lorenzo will be able to do nothing,” answered Giacinto gloomily. “ If you knew everything, you would know that, too. What am I here for? I ask you. Because of—but no, I will not go on. It all rests with my father—an evil death on him! ”

“ Silence! ” commanded Don Bartolomeo. “ Do you wish to bring the just anger of Heaven upon you by saying such things? May you be forgiven for it! ”

“ There is no justice,” said Giacinto, “ or I should not be where I am to-night. Oh, Don Bartolomeo, say”—and springing to his feet, he came around to the priest’s side—“ can you tell me for what crime I have been kept here these four years—fourteen hundred days and nights of a living death? ”

But Don Bartolomeo only turned away and sat down again at the table.

“ What is—is,” he replied. “ It only remains to make the best of it. We can do no more than pray that something may soon happen to bring about your speedy release. Nor does it rest entirely with Prince Bordelacqua, but rather with the Holy

Father, to say whether or not you are to be reinstated in your rights, Giacinto. Which makes a great difference, let me tell you—all the difference in the world."

The room in which they were talking was long and low, showing that the house itself had not been built for the personal use of the Bordelacqua family, but of one of their prosperous tenant farmers. The walls were of brick, whitewashed and bare of pictures, except one of a sacred subject, the Espousal of the Virgin, a copy of the painting by Sodoma at Sienna. There were three windows to the room and a heavy door at either end. Of these doors, one led on to a flight of stairs going down into a court-yard communicating with a walled garden behind the house; and the other into Don Bartolomeo's bed-chamber and study. Giacinto's room lay beyond that of Don Bartolomeo, and as was the case with Fiordelisa's in Palazzo Bordelacqua in Rome, could only be reached by passing through the outer one. The house had only two stories above the ground floor—which was used as a storehouse for wood and oil—that on which Giacinto lived with Don Bartolomeo, and a series of attics above it, containing the kitchen and a couple of servants' rooms. In one of these slept Andrea, who attended to the wants of his two gentlemen with the devotion of a faithful dog and the deft sympathy of a woman.

The existence led by the three men since the day when they had arrived there under an escort of Prince Bordelacqua's men-at-arms, had only varied in accordance with the seasons of the year. In Summer they rose regularly at five o'clock and in Winter at six. At six or seven, as the case might be, Mass was said by Don Bartolomeo in his bedroom; upon which followed breakfast and the morning's occupation of instruction for Giacinto in philosophy and mathematics, with an occasional smattering of natural science. After that came the midday meal and a nap; the rest of the afternoon being given up to some form or other of open-air exercise, a walk in the garden, or a game of bowls until supper time. Don Bartolomeo's object being to train his pupil's mind to act normally and clearly, and to strengthen it gradually until it should be capable of balancing aright—he was always careful to avoid overstraining or exciting it.

But sometimes, as on this particular night, Giacinto himself insisted on turning the talk into undesirable channels; when nothing would satisfy him but to bring it to the same miserable termination with the threat of suicide unless his liberty were given back to him.

After four years of solitary companionship, during which he had diligently observed Don Giacinto in all his ways, Don Bartolomeo was convinced that

the young man was now as sane as himself. Even if, formerly, there might have been in Giacinto some want of mental stability—which alone (presuming that Prince Bordelacqua had spoken the truth) could account to the priest for the tragedy of Casa Bordelacqua—there was no longer the least trace of such a defect in him. Giacinto's apparent total oblivion of his own actual crime (again supposing the Prince not to have lied) Don Bartolomeo ascribed to the effects of the blow on the lad's head from the hilt of his father's sword. Giacinto did not dream that he was supposed to have stabbed his own mother; and Don Bartolomeo could not well know what Giacinto would rather have died than allow to be known to anybody besides himself and his father and De Curtis; that is to say, the shame that the dead Princess had brought upon her husband and her children and herself by her intrigue with the “cavaliere servente.” As has been told, Don Bartolomeo had long ago guessed the truth as to Princess Bordelacqua's death; but since then he had come to feel much less sure of the accuracy of his judgments. Anything, as he sometimes felt bound to remind himself, is possible in this amazing world of ours—it might even be that Prince Bordelacqua had for once actually told the truth, and that Don Bartolomeo's beloved Giacinto—generous, ingenuous Giacinto!—had done the thing imputed to him.

As to Giacinto himself, all that he could suppose was that his father had thus removed him from the world of living men through personal dislike. That the Prince had ever imagined that he would be capable of betraying the history of his mother's end to a living soul, had never even entered Giacinto's mind—any more than that his father accused him of being a matricide. By what device Prince Bordelacqua had been enabled to save himself from being held to answer for killing his wife, or how he had contrived to throw a cloak over the whole episode—if, indeed, he had succeeded in doing so—Giacinto preferred to remain in ignorance rather than risk the possibility of betraying his mother's dishonour by questioning even good Don Bartolomeo on the subject.

On the other hand, however, Prince Bordelacqua had repeatedly cross-examined Don Bartolomeo as to anything that Giacinto might have let fall in respect to the past; and, on learning of his son's silence, had contented himself with warning the old priest against the danger of his being imposed upon at any time by what he termed "poor Giacinto's delusions."

Although no reference was ever made either by Don Bartolomeo or Giacinto, to the details of Princess Bordelacqua's death, yet the fact of her demise in itself was occasionally touched upon in their talk;

and Giacinto never mentioned his mother without some expression of forgiving pity—as though she had been to blame, in a measure, for her son's tribulations. To his father, however, he rarely, if ever, referred without that same frightful malediction for which Don Bartolomeo had, but just now, reproved him. Of Salvatore Gozzoli, on the contrary, Giacinto spoke often with warm affection, accusing himself of the responsibility for the man's dismissal. The "cavaliere servente," De Curtis, he never named at all.

Nor had once the name of Fiordelisa passed his lips in conversation with the priest. Only in the infrequent, frantic outpourings of prayer, with which, at long intervals, he sought to force Heaven to his aid, did Don Giacinto ever speak of his wife.

During this particular evening, however, the yearning to see Fiordelisa again and to hear her sweet, grave voice, had increased in Giacinto until, by now, it had become well-nigh intolerable. For the first time since his imprisonment, he was beginning to find himself unable to endure the thought of his dainty bride any longer without the consolation of hearing such news of her as Don Bartolomeo might be able to give him. Coming back to the table where his old friend was still standing, his face half bathed in the lamplight and half lost in the shadows, Giacinto asked:

“Tell me, Don Bartolomeo, where is my wife? And when am I to be allowed to see her again? For the time must be up for her homecoming from the convent.”

“Donna Fiordelisa is now in Rome, I believe,” replied the priest, “but I cannot say exactly when you will see her, because—well, because——” and the rest of the sentence died away in embarrassed silence.

“Because it is quite possible that I may never see her again at all—is that it?” said Giacinto. “I understand.”

To which Don Bartolomeo could find no answer. Giacinto, likewise, remained without speaking for some seconds. Suddenly he asked:

“And in that case, what then? Would my marriage be dissolved? And my place, perhaps, as Fiordelisa’s husband, taken by someone else of my father’s choosing—my brother, for instance?” and with the last words, his voice sank almost to a whisper.

At this point, however, Don Bartolomeo could bear it no more; with a quick gesture of his head as though to shake off the question, he sat down in his chair by the table; the while Giacinto, his soul heavy with new forebodings, stood there, watching him moodily.

Presently, in the stillness, an idea came to Giacinto.

“I would like to know,” he said slowly, “whether or not, in your heart, you believe that I am being unjustly deprived, not only of my liberty, but of all my rights as a human being?”

Although the other met Giacinto’s glance, yet he delayed a little before responding.

“Let us not say ‘unjustly,’ but, rather, ‘mistakenly’ deprived of your liberty, my son,” he said at length. “You have suffered, yes, it is true; but I think you are the better for it. You may not agree with me—but that is what I think. And when I tell you that his lordship, your uncle, has promised soon to plead your case again with the Holy Father, you should take comfort. For you may rest assured that Don Lorenzo will not plead in vain, this time; and that, before long, you will learn of the result.”

But Giacinto only shrugged his shoulders and turned away in silence that was more eloquent than any words of his despair.

“If you knew my father,” he thought bitterly, “you would see the hopelessness of it all as I do.” And then, coming back to the table, he pursued, aloud:

“Unwisely—unjustly—it is the same thing. Supposing, then that my uncle fails to procure my re-

lease from this place—in that case would you still befriend me, Don Bartolomeo?"

"In what way do you mean? I fail to understand—"

"By helping me to escape. Will you do that much for me, Don Bartolomeo? You could come with me, and we would go away somewhere—anywhere, it does not matter—where Fiordelisa could join us afterwards. Will you?" he cried in his eagerness, "will you?"

As he put the question, Giacinto came quite close to Don Bartolomeo and plucked him by the sleeve. But the priest only stared at Giacinto affrightedly, so that he had to repeat the words.

"Will you help me to escape, Don Bartolomeo? Will you—"

But before he could finish the sentence Don Bartolomeo laid a hand hastily on Giacinto's mouth.

"Hush! For the love of Heaven be quiet," he implored him. "If anyone were to overhear you, I doubt if I should ever see your face again, or you mine!" And then, more calmly, as he lowered his hand: "It grieves me—but I cannot do what you ask, because my position here is one of trust. I am bound in honour to watch over you until the Pope's will is made known in regard to you. But have no fear—the Holy Father will, I am confident, accede to the Bishop's request that you should be—set at

liberty." He had been on the point of saying "examined," but checked himself in time. For the fact of his presumed mental infirmity was, of course, not a thing that was ever openly referred to before Giacinto.

Nor could any entreaty of Giacinto's induce Don Bartolomeo to alter his decision; and when, presently, they parted for the night, it was with a reproach on Giacinto's part for the priest's obduracy.

"What makes you so hard-hearted towards me?" he asked. "Have you, too, joined the adherents of him who hates me?"

"Ah, Giacinto, do not speak so of your father—for I know that it is he whom you mean!" his friend implored him. "And do not take my refusal in this way—as though I had never given you any proofs of my affection. Come, I think you know better than that, is it not so?"

But Giacinto could not answer, and betook himself to his own room, unable to speak for the misery of his situation. Hour after hour he lay sleepless on his bed, thinking how to break a way for himself through the toils in which Prince Bordelacqua had kept him so long a prisoner; until, at last, he fell asleep towards dawn, spent with unavailing rage and the torment of his fruitless longings for freedom and Fiordelisa.

At the upper end of the spacious garden, hidden from sight by a grove of ilex trees, stood a second house exactly similar to that in which Giacinto lived with Don Bartolomeo and Andrea. In this house were quartered halberdiers, whose duty it was to keep watch over the movements of their prisoner and his two companions; each of the four acted as a sentry during six hours of the day, at the main gate of the enclosure which opened on to a rough hill track of the Sabines.

On the other side of the lane from the enclosure, was a narrow stretch of turf, sweet-smelling penny-royal, the scent of which drifted into the rooms of Giacinto's house during the hot hours of the day; and, beyond this again, were oak woods stretching away as far as the eye could see, in wide waves of rolling greenery, towards the Abruzzi and the distant far-away line of the Gran Sasso.

On the afternoon of the day after the scene just recounted between Giacinto and Don Bartolomeo, the servant Andrea, leading a donkey laden with a couple of empty panniers, approached the sentry at the gate and hailed him:

“Oh! Sor Tobia—kindly let me through. It is Wednesday, if I may remind you,” he called cheerily. Every Wednesday and Saturday, Andrea, in his capacity of cook, made the three-mile trip to

Acquanera to get provisions there from the castle kitchen.

“More food, eh?” laughed the man-at-arms, as he proceeded to unlock the gate with the key which he took from where it hung on his belt. “*Diamini!* but you have good appetites, you and your two gentlemen! Or is there some other attraction down there at the castle?”—accompanying the words with a wink.

“I understand you,” retorted Andrea, slipping through the open gate and making off rapidly, into the shadow of the further side of the road. “But I will not condescend to answer you—such talk as yours is a defilement to the lips!”

At which the soldier laughed again and resumed his monotonous pacing to and fro, behind the gate. Everybody knew that Andrea’s ambition was to become an ecclesiastic; hence the sport of baiting him. The halberdier, Tobia, like his comrades, was always thankful for any chance of varying the dulness of routine with a jest at Andrea’s expense. And, whilst he paced up and down in the shadow of the wall, listening to the faint hoofbeats of the donkey as it padded away over the turf, Tobia’s thoughts turned with regret to the things he had left behind him when he came up here into the hills on his detested duty of mounting guard over Don Giacinto Bordelacqua.

“In the old days,” he grumbled to himself, “how different it used to be—in Rome, when Gozzoli was our captain, and a man could get out into the city of an evening and enjoy himself with his friends like a Christian! But ever since the Swiss laid hands on us—by all the Saints!—we might as well be rowing in a galley with a chain to our necks! Is it to be endured? No, I say! If it were not for the extra pay—and that is little enough—I would rather go to work like a labourer—yes, I, a man of the sword!”—and he spat angrily upon the ground.

In the meanwhile, Andrea was pursuing his way, unconcernedly enough, beside the donkey. It was all of an hour’s walk to his goal, the castle of Accanera down among the chestnut trees where the hills sank into the narrow valley of a river, the Liris. As he went, he lifted up his voice experimentally and began to chant the opening periods of the “Gloria in excelsis” in imitation of Don Bartolomeo. The effect pleased him; and when presently his companion broke in upon his notes by braying, Andrea so far forgot himself as to strike the creature in his vexation. But he soon took up his chanting again, with a sonorous cadence that rose and fell exultingly upon the balmy air; for he was gifted with a beautiful voice, of which the perfectly controlled notes rolled out without effort, rich and polished and

heavy, in a volume of softly plangent thunder, from the bull-neck and wide mouth of him.

Thus occupied, the time slipped by all too quickly, until suddenly the donkey stopped short in the middle of the road, at a place where it was narrowest and where the trees overhung it on both sides so as almost to shut out the sunlight. Whereupon, Andrea came near to losing his temper again, for he was just then triumphantly trilling the last verse of one of the Vesper psalms—the “*Laudate Dominum.*”

“Am I a Balaam, that you take it on you to interrupt me thus again?” he demanded. “Go on—for I see no angel in the path——” raising his stick, but only to let it fall harmless once more to his side as someone hailed him by name from among the trees.

“*Oh!* Andrea—is that you?” called the voice; and looking up, he saw that a woman was coming towards him; a peasant, he judged at first, for he was rather short-sighted and could not distinguish her features until she was nearer, although there was something familiar in her voice.

“Have I changed so much then, since we last met, that you no longer know me?” asked Teresinella as she approached. “But, indeed, I am dusty enough to pass for a hundred years old!”—glancing down at her travel-stained skirt of heavy black cloth and

the thick shoes of dark brown ox-leather, now all grey and frayed with weeks of walking.

“Why, Sora Teresa, what brings you here, of all places?” cried Andrea, advancing to meet her. “Of course, I knew you—can I forget our friendship so easily? But let us rest a while—and you shall tell me your news. Do you come from the Veneto? And have you heard anything there of what is going to happen next in regard to—to Donna Fiordelisa and our Don Giacinto? Here, we know nothing, but can only suppose that——”

“That—what, Sor Andrea?”—leading the way to a grassy bank by the roadside and seating herself upon it. “Tell me, I entreat you—what is that you suppose?”

Casting himself down beside her, the donkey’s rein over his wrist, Andrea nodded wisely.

“That Don Giacinto will soon be set at liberty; and so he and Donna Fiordelisa will be free to live together, as Don Giacinto, at least, is pining to do. I know, because I have sometimes overheard him at his prayers while Don Bartolomeo is reading his breviary in the garden and I am sweeping out their sitting-room.”

Teresinella, apparently, was scarcely listening; raising her head she looked away westward to Celano and the Marsica, once the country of the Marsi and land of the magicians who, as the descendants

of the enchantress Circe, were credited with power to render harmless the poison of snakes and to turn men into animals.

"You have a good enough country here," she said, "but a rough one. For myself, I prefer our plains in the Veneto. So you think that Don Giacinto is likely to be soon liberated? Why do you think so?"

"Because it is now four years since we—Don Bartolomeo and I—came to live with him up there at the farm, with the jerk of a thumb over his shoulder. "That is a long time ago—and Don Giacinto has committed no crimes that I know of to be kept a prisoner all his life."

"No? Then why does the most excellent Prince Bordelacqua keep him shut up there, Sor Andrea? Shall I tell you why? Because, I think, there is something the matter with that Don Giacinto of yours. It is my belief that he is a leper—"

Teresinella spoke purposely in this way, so as to irritate Andrea into telling her the truth about Giacinto, to whom she knew him of old to be devoted. This she did in case he should be under promise or vow of secrecy respecting Giacinto's condition, for, unless she could succeed in angering him, this golden opportunity which chance had afforded her of obtaining the information she needed might be lost.

But the shot told; and Andrea at once sprang to repudiate the charge of leprosy.

“A leper—Don Giacinto!” he cried. “How can you think such a thing, Sora Teresa? No, no; believe me, there is nothing of the kind the matter with him. All that he has suffered from has been a slight—a very slight, tendency to overheating of the brain—a sort of intermittent cerebral fever, you understand. At least, that is how I once heard Don Bartolomeo describe it to his lordship, Don Lorenzo, when I went one day, with Don Bartolomeo to pay his respects to Don Lorenzo when he was passing through Acquanera on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Bernardino at Aquila. And now, Don Giacinto is well again—perfectly well—and is only waiting the order for his release to return to *Casa Bordelacqua*. May it soon reach him!”

For a moment Teresinella was so struck by this expectation of Andrea’s that, tired out as she was, she was almost persuaded that her enterprise was an unnecessary one, and that no further efforts on her part were called for; since the liberation of Don Giacinto was so near its accomplishment. When she remembered, however, that Prince Bordelacqua’s personal antipathy to his eldest son was closely bound up with the working of the whole affair, she saw the folly of assuming beforehand any beneficent official action of the authorities in re-

gard to Don Giacinto's case and, therefore, decided to ignore any such possibility. All that she was concerned with was the question of the young man's health, and with nothing else.

" You mean that Don Giacinto was put away by his father on account of something here"—tapping her forehead. " I see. He was mad; and now he is——"

" Mad? No! What a notion! Don Giacinto was formerly somewhat excitable—easily stirred to anger, and the like—that was all. To-day, he is as sensible as you or I, my dear. If you don't believe me, you can ask Don Bartolomeo, himself."

" Oh, I believe you, Sor Andrea, easily enough. But what must you not have had to endure, yourself, in confinement with him, all these years. It must be like being in prison, is it not?"

" As to that, well, yes—you might say there is a certain likeness. Day and night, the place is guarded by one of the halberdiers at the gate. There are four of them living up there all the time—besides Captain Stürmli when the Prince comes to Acquanera in the summer."

Teresinella, who was making a mental calculation of certain chances, did not reply at once. Presently, though, she remarked:

" Poor souls, it must be dull for them! Do they never get a day's holiday at all, then? For instance,

when the time of the vintage comes round in September, are they forbidden to come down for a few hours to enjoy themselves with the folk at Acquanera?"

To this Andrea shook his head deprecatingly.

"To be sure, it is forbidden them to do so," he said, "but once, two years ago, when the most excellent Prince happened to be away at that season, and Captain Stürmli was busy with the horses over at the stud farm at Capistrella, three of them spent the whole vintage-night down at the village. I am sorry to say, too, that they came back the worse for liquor—an abominable business it was! The only sober one was he whom they left behind to let them in. What is more, alas! I cannot help fearing they meditate something of the kind this year, if they get the chance. Last September, the Prince was in residence at Acquanera, so that they were prevented from repeating their drunkenness. This time, though, I greatly fear they may be enabled to carry out their nefarious intentions."

"What makes you think so?" asked Teresinella innocently.

"Because I heard the captain say that he expects to be at Capistrella again in September; and, also, because the Prince talks, as I gather, of being in Rome about that time. I do not know, of course, on what account, but I fancy it has to do with Don Gia-

cinto's affairs, for I heard Don Bartolomeo tell him that there was to be held a family council in regard to them and that both Don Lorenzo and Donna Olimpia had announced their intentions of meeting the Prince there."

"Oh, well," said Teresinella, "there is no great harm after all, in the poor soldiers taking a little holiday when they can get one, and I am sure you would not be so unkind as to wish to prevent it, Andrea. As to their getting drunk, soldiers are always more noisy than other men when they are enjoying themselves. If they sing a song or two, it does not mean that they have been drinking too much, but only that they are happy. And you, yourself," she concluded, "are you fairly comfortable at the farm?"

"Yes, I am comfortable—more so than I would choose to be if I had the choice," answered Andrea, who in his heart was ambitious of emulating the austerties of the Saint of Assisi. "But I sometimes think that Don Giacinto and Don Bartolomeo must find it rather hard to have only three rooms to live in between them——"

And he went on to describe the farmhouse and its accommodations in detail. When he had finished his account of the place, Teresinella rose leisurely and made as though about to move on along her road.

"But you have not told me yet," said Andrea, "what brings you into these parts."

"I am going home again from the city, where I went to meet my mistress on her return from the convent at Castel Gandolfo," replied Teresinella. "Donna Fiordelisa is grown to be a very beautiful young lady, but she looks as sad as the Madonna of the Seven Dolours—the separation from her husband is surely killing her. Well, with Heaven's help they will soon be reunited, Sor Andrea."

"Assuredly they will! What?—must you be going already? Take care of yourself, Sora Teresa! Perhaps we may soon meet again—when Don Giacinto goes north with his wife. So—*arrivederci!*"

"*Arrivederci*, Sor Andrea—" and Teresinella set off once more, up the shadow-patterned road, towards the farm. Suddenly it occurred to her that Andrea might wonder why she should be travelling this road at all on her way northward, and so she paused an instant to throw back an explanation over her shoulder.

"I have a message to give Don Giacinto," she called back. "Shall I be allowed to deliver it to him, do you think?"

"You had better ask at the gate for Don Bartolomeo," returned Andrea. "No word can reach Don Giacinto except through him." And so saying, he waved a hand in farewell and scrambled to his feet.

“Get up, Eleabthona,” he adjured the donkey—so named after the animal on which, according to tradition, Our Lady rode to visit her cousin, Saint Elisabeth, and which afterwards bore her and the Divine Child on their flight from Herod into Egypt.

Later on, while the sun was beginning to dip very slowly over distant Castel Madama, and the cooler air was all fragrant with the perfume of juniper and arbutus, Teresinella, having delivered her message for Giacinto to Don Bartolomeo, began to retrace her footsteps towards Rome. She was as well satisfied concerning Don Giacinto as was the priest himself, from whom she had received, in exchange for her message, further and very positive reassurances for Fiordelisa’s comfort as to Giacinto’s health. But Don Bartolomeo had not been able to assign any positive date for the young man’s restoration to his wife.

“Bid her have patience yet a little while,” he had said to Teresinella, “and all will go well. The matter is doubtless in good hands at this moment—those of the Holy Father, who will most certainly order what is right to be done.”

But Teresinella, through her talk with Fiordelisa in Rome, had already formed her own opinion on the subject. With Fiordelisa, she was persuaded that Prince Bordelacqua had no intention of releasing his son unless he should be compelled to do so;

for, since leaving Casa Bordelacqua, she had learned a good deal—and had guessed even more—of the conditions existing there prior to the Princess' death.

The truth was that for some considerable time before his dismissal from the Princess' service, Salvatore Gozzoli had been paying court to Teresinella, whose first husband had long been dead.

Upon finding himself therefore without a master, Gozzoli had resolved upon bringing his courtship of Teresinella—who had already gone back to the Veneto—to a finish by marrying her, and so, after a fashion, attaching himself to the service of Fiordelisa and of Giacinto in opposition to that of Prince Bordelacqua. This purpose he had, as yet, carried only partially into effect by obtaining employment from the steward of Fiordelisa's estate, one Luigi Bramai, as a bailiff and rent-collector; and as the steward, who chanced to be a friend of other days, had been induced to keep the matter of his employment a secret from Casa Bordelacqua, Captain Gozzoli had now continued undisturbed in it during several years. Teresinella, though, had proved less accommodating and had hitherto kept her suitor in suspense for a definite answer to his entreaties that she would become his wife; so that by the time she had recently left San Michele on her long journey to Fiordelisa in Rome, Gozzoli had almost given up all

hope of marrying her, albeit he was still as ardently her wooer as ever.

But now, as she walked slowly down the hill-track towards the hamlet where she meant to pass the night, Teresinella reflected seriously upon her hard-heartedness towards the faithful Salvatore.

"If this thing is to be done,"—it was of Don Giacinto's liberation that she was thinking—"there is no one in the whole world but my Salvatore who can do it. He alone is strong enough and fearless and clever enough. That was who I meant, of course, when I told Donna Fiordelisa that I would send her a man. But what will he say when I tell him what I want? 'Marry me and I will do it for you, Teresinella'—that is exactly what he will say. And I?—yes, what will I do? I shall have to say 'yes.' Well, I am glad of it. And Heaven be thanked, there will be room for us all at San Michele—for Salvatore and for me as well as for Donna Fiordelisa and Don Giacinto! For, somehow, I do not think Don Giacinto will ever again live under the same roof with the most illustrious Prince Bor-delacqua."

And, having thus decided upon her course of action, Teresinella walked on with renewed energy, down towards the valley of the Liris, whence through the stillness there floated up to her the faint ringing of a church bell sounding the hour of the evening salutation.

CHAPTER X

THE Church of Sant' Onofrio, standing upon the high ground above the Lungara, was then a comparatively modern one, having been rebuilt only so recently as the fifteenth century by a certain Palena, in honour of the Theban hermit, Honophrius; a monastic church, if ever there was one—it belonged to the neighbouring monastery of Hieronymite monks, the spiritual children of Saint Jerome—with its sombre, glazed frescoes and its austere magnificence, dimly lighted interior.

As Fiordelisa approached the church on foot by the steep ascent which led up to it from the Lungara, at Vesper time on the day set by Teresinella, her heart beat so that she could hear it. She was followed at a few feet of distance by Pio Sacchetti, who carried her prayer-book; the steward walked very upright with a firm, measured tread, and, as he went, kept turning his head from side to side to note the few people who were likewise going up the ascent to the church. For he had been instructed by Prince Bordelacqua to keep a sharp lookout for any of the Roman youths who, seeing the beauty of Fiordelisa, might attempt to make her acquaintance, since the Prince, having in view the dissolution of the mar-

riage ties which already bound her, had no mind to go to so much trouble merely for the benefit of another family than his own; and there were not wanting several heads of houses as he well knew—and those far higher in the Pope's favour—who would be capable of moving Heaven and earth to marry a son or a nephew to Fiordelisa and her fortune.

Having reached the top of the ascent, Fiordelisa delayed a moment to get her breath and to gather her courage together before entering. All that day she had been going in constant terror either lest Teresinella should not have been able to keep her appointment, or else, lest having kept it, it might only be as the bearer of some fatal news from Acquanera. And so she lingered in the colonnade of the porch and gazed out questioningly over the city at her feet, afraid to go further for fear of what might be awaiting her beyond the leather "*portière*" of the church that a crippled beggar was holding up for her to pass into the building.

Below her lay the evening world of Rome with its grey palaces turned to gold in the slowly paling sunlight, and its hundreds of churches, pink and white and saffron, scattered among the red-roofed houses or separated from them by high deep fissures full of blue and violet shadows. She was trying her hardest to bring herself to the point of entering the

church, but it was not until she felt that Sacchetti's eyes were fastened upon her suspiciously that she turned away from the view and crossed the narrow porch to the doorway. Here, as her glance fell to the cripple propped up against the wall, it flashed upon her to profit by the circumstance. Glancing over her shoulder to the steward, she bade him give the man an alms, she knowing that it would take Sacchetti some little time to find the smallest coin in his purse—and then went swiftly on into the murky sanctuary.

It was several seconds before she dared to open her eyes; when at length she did so they would not at first take in more than the remote sanctuary at the upper end of the aisle, all hazy with incense-smoke—for Vespers were over and Benediction was already in progress—through which the golden flame-points of the tapers burning upon the Altar showed soft and evanescent as fireflies.

Gradually, however, she compelled herself to glance about her to left and right and then she all but allowed a cry to escape her as her gaze rested on the figure of a woman standing close by, near the font, with her back to the doorway. Before Pio Sacchetti could come up with her, Fiordelisa moved on quickly past the woman, whispering very low a single word as she went:

“Teresinella.”

The other, though, made no reply, but only drew back, as if to seek some spot where she might pray undisturbed by the coming and going of the crowd; nevertheless, Fiordelisa had recognised her, and, in consequence, was filled with a gladness so overpowering that she was compelled to kneel down by the nearest chair in order to hide her transcendent joy from Sacchetti, who was now close behind her. Later, when the service had come to an end, she ventured, in leaving the church once more, to cast a look towards the spot to which she had seen Teresinella move at her approach. But in vain; there was nothing to be seen there any longer, saving only the great marble font—that and Pio Sacchetti, who was standing between it and Fiordelisa, his arms folded and his head bowed in an attitude of respectful recollection.

Sacchetti, indeed, had caught no sight of Teresinella's face, but only the back of her, and so had not bestowed more than a cursory glance upon the bowed and dusty female figure so absorbed, to all appearances, in prayer. But, as Fiordelisa turned her head to look back into the church while he was holding aside the curtain for her to pass out, the steward had a glimpse of her expression and was so struck by it that he resolved to lose no time in reporting the fact to his master.

“If I were Don Ferdinando”—by which he meant

Prince Bordelacqua—"I would certainly put this girl into a place of safety until the question of whom she belongs to has been securely settled," he thought. "But as to expecting our Don Ferdinando to take another person's advice, why that, of course, would be the height of folly."

Excusing himself on the plea of having left something behind him, Sacchetti went back into the aisle and looked swiftly about him for any sign of a familiar countenance among the departing congregation; but without result, and as time pressed, he was obliged to abandon his quest and to go out once more to the porch where Fiordelisa was awaiting him, her back to the church and her gaze fixed upon the old tinted city below.

The day had been one of the hottest of all that summer in Rome. For weeks, not a drop of rain had fallen on the city itself, although for days past, storms had been circling among the Volscian hills far away to the southward round about Norma and Segni. But now, as her eyes ranged the southern sky, Fiordelisa saw that it was full of redundant, lurid clouds, smoke-grey and orange and pink; so she knew that a change was at hand. As the next day was that set by Prince Bordelacqua for the transference of his family for the summer from Rome to Acquanera, Fiordelisa could only hope that the weather would stay as it was a little longer.

As she walked down to where the coach was waiting for her in the Lungara—Prince Bordelacqua had insisted on her making use of it, despite the short distance, to go to Sant' Onofrio—she tried to reckon how long it would be before she could see Giacinto and feel his arms round her. But in this attempt she found herself baffled completely by the fact that she had no idea of where the man that Teresinella had promised to send to her assistance was to come from. Doubtless, though, she would be enabled by some message from Teresinella herself to know him when he came. But what were these trifling uncertainties in comparison with her radiant assurance that Giacinto was not, as she had been told by the Prince, hopelessly insane, but in his right mind, and that, before long, he would be restored to her? She could have sung aloud and have danced for the joy that filled her.

Since her return from Castel Gandolfo, Fiordilisa had been agreeably surprised by the unexpected deference of Prince Bordelacqua's attitude towards her. It was as though he wished to mark her establishment as the future mistress of Casa Bordelacqua by every means in his power. Not a day went by but he found occasion either for asking her opinion upon some question of household management, or

else of publicly consulting her wishes as to this or that arrangement—the hour, for instance, of the daily drive, which was then just beginning to be a part of fashionable Roman life; or the direction of it; or any other point which might appeal to her self-esteem and imbue her with a sense of gratification in the thought of the universal consideration she might continue to enjoy under such auspices.

For he was most anxious that Fiordelisa should appreciate to the full the worldly advantages which would be her lot if she were to become the wife of Don Cesare, although he had never openly mentioned such a possibility in her hearing. Of course, she would be a rich woman in her own right, but nowhere else save in Rome would she be able to hold quite the same undisputed social sway and pre-eminence that would be hers as the future Princess Bordelacqua. And so he applied himself assiduously to doing all that lay in his power by which to captivate the girl's imagination and to stimulate her appetite for worldly things. In this way he had seized the opportunity presented by the condition of Fiordelisa's wardrobe for making her a gift of an entirely new one, including a most wonderful dress of sea-green brocade and another of old-rose satin, as well as having a number of the family jewels reset for her to wear. But of her own money, she had naturally not yet been allowed to touch one piece, nor,

except in the privacy of her own two rooms, had she been able to pass a single moment alone.

Early on the next day after her glimpse of Teresinella at Vespers in the church of Sant' Onofrio, Fiordelisa set out in the coach for Acquanera accompanied by the Prince and Don Cesare, together with the Chaplain, Padre Ogniben, who had succeeded Don Bartolomeo after the latter had left the palace with Giacinto; while the household followed in three other carriages piled with baggage and surrounded by a strong escort of men-at-arms on horseback, under Anton Stürmli's charge, for fear of the brigands with whom the country districts were infested. Leaving the city by the Porta San Lorenzo, they went down into the valley of the Teverone, all thick with the mists that yet lay, white and feathery, upon the water gliding smoothly between its high banks beneath the straggling willows that marked its sunken course. Later on, they passed the Lake of the Tartari, where reigned desolation supreme amid a stench of sulphur telling of other lakes, known as those of the Solfatara, the ruins near which, as Prince Bordelacqua explained to Fiordelisa, were once the baths of Queen Zenobia of Palmyra, who was brought as a prisoner to Rome by the Emperor Aurelian. Thence the carriages went on past the mighty tomb of the Plautii and struck into the lane leading to the lonely ruins of Adrian's villa, where

the travellers halted to rest the horses before breasting the hill to Tivoli, and to take some refreshment themselves. Never, in all her life, had Fiordelisa seen anything so entrancing as that enchanted spot. The air was redolent with the perfume of millions of flowers and alive with the twittering of little birds that had their nests amid the dilapidated halls and temples and amphitheatres where an imperial court had once had its splendid being so long ago.

Soon, however, they were on their way again; leaving Tivoli behind, they came out into the tumbled open country past Castel Madama and Vicovaro to Arsoli, which they reached early in the afternoon. It was night ere they came to grim Tagliacozzo with its memories of Conrad of Hohenstaufen, the murdered boy-king of Naples, and his sanguinary defeat at the hands of Charles of Anjou; and by the time the convoy reached Acquanera night had fallen and a silvery moon rode high in the sky among the dappled clouds over the wooded Sabines. The air was cooler by far than in Rome, and Fiordelisa gladly accepted the offer of Prince Bordelacqua's cloak to wrap round her as they got down from the carriage to ease the horses by walking up the last steep rise from the valley to the domain of Acquanera.

All through the journey her father-in-law had consistently shown himself the tenderest of parents

towards Fiordelisa who, on her part, had returned the Prince's amiability as well as she could for the invincible hostility that was in her heart towards him. Don Cesare, on the contrary, had seemed almost unfriendly to the girl by reason of a new and altogether unusual reserve which, as Fiordelisa had noticed, had descended upon him from the moment of his father's little speech at the midday meal on the morning of her return from Castel Gandolfo. For it was plain to Fiordelisa that Cesare, also, had understood Prince Bordelacqua's intention in saying what he had said as to there being no misunderstandings for the future between the three of them; and that he had been almost as disagreeably impressed by it as she herself had been. As a matter of fact, his father had since then been far more outspoken with Cesare than he had allowed himself to be with Fiordelisa on the subject of the annulment of her marriage with Giacinto. And although Cesare had viewed the matter more complacently than she, yet, somehow, the thought of thus hurriedly taking away his brother's wife from him had struck the lad—for all that he believed Giacinto's case incurable—as a thing at once cold-blooded and unnatural. So that from that hour he had held himself somewhat at a distance from Fiordelisa, as though to avoid any participation in Prince Bordelacqua's schemes for his advancement. Left to himself, indeed, Cesare

would have much preferred to continue as long as possible a bachelor with no more responsibility than could be avoided; for he was now on the verge of manhood, and the love of liberty was strong in him.

During the weeks, then, that followed on their coming to Acquanera, the three, Prince Bordelacqua, Fiordelisa and Cesare, lived as it were in a perpetual round of cross-purposes. At first the Prince constantly let fall hints as to his hope of seeing Fiordelisa united to Cesare; hints which awaked no response whatever from one or the other of them until, at last, he appeared to have abandoned all attempts to arouse their coöperation and to be relying simply on their habit of passive obedience to aid in bringing about the success of his plans. For the rest, he had decided that his wisest course would be to let the fact of Giacinto's existence fall into oblivion and become forgotten by the government; so that, in time, the authorities would come to take more for granted than, as he fancied, they were as yet quite prepared to do. Yes, indeed; of all possible allies, as the Prince came now to see, his most valuable were Time on the one hand and Habit on the other. With the aid of these two he felt perfectly confident of the ultimate result. Moreover, be it said, he was quite prepared, in the event of their proving too slow in the working, to hurry them by any means in his power.

As to the two young people, they went their sepa-

rate ways unheeding of one another, Cesare spending the greater part of his time out of doors in the pursuit of small game, wood-pigeons and rabbits, and Fiordelisa hers in embroidery, in reading aloud to her father-in-law and in daily walks among the woods. For these last she had obtained the Prince's sanction, although not without difficulty, on condition of her being accompanied either by the butler, Sor Sebastiano—Pio Sachetti having been left behind in Rome to look after the palace—or by one of her little maids.

As in Palazzo Bordelacqua, the Prince lived to a great extent almost entirely apart from the rest of the household at Acquanera, the apartments he occupied here being situated by themselves at one corner of the castle and communicating with the family dining- and drawing-rooms by a long passage and a flight of stairs. These apartments were both large and lofty, like the rest of those in the castle, and looked out to the south and east toward the narrow valley of the Liris, although the river was not visible from Acquanera by reason of the intervening ridge, near the summit of which was the farm where Giacinto was imprisoned with Don Bartolomeo and Andrea. Beyond it were several other ridges running parallel with it, great ribs of limestone, clothed with thick woods which sank at last into the downs and stony pastures of the delta or river lands be-

tween Avezzano and the Sabines. It was over these last outposts of the Sabines that Fiordelisa from her window would watch the summer moon break into the sky, sometimes as a narrow reaping-hoop of silver and sometimes as a honey-coloured ball; not infrequently, indeed during this time of waiting for some sign of Teresinella's activity, she would sit up half the night there at the window, alone with her thoughts until her friend the moon had passed out of sight beyond the corner of the castle.

From the highroad, such as it was, that wound through the mountains between Rome and Aquila, a long avenue of ancient chestnut trees led to the stronghold of Acquanera, which was built in the form of a hollow square about a gravelled courtyard. Beyond the castle the immediate land fell away in terraced gardens for some seventy or eighty feet on three sides of an isolated rocky hill, and then rose again abruptly into the general rise of the surrounding country. On the further side of the road, at the end of the avenue, was an extensive wood, below which, a good mile and more from the castle itself, was the village of Acquanera, the centre of Prince Bordelacqua's vineyards, where the great wine vats were situated; here, at the vintage-time in October, the grapes would be brought up in carts from the lower country to be trodden into liquid, and during an entire night the peasants, when

the last of the vats should be full, would dance and sing and drink about them to their hearts' content.

It was on the first day of July that the Prince had transferred himself with the remainder of his family from Rome to the country. What Andrea had told Teresinella as to the Prince's expecting to be recalled to the city, on the business of a family council, about the vintage-time, was true; for Donna Olimpia Bordelacqua, who was entitled to take part in such affairs, had refused absolutely to make the longer journey for that purpose from Castel Gandolfo to Acquanera, where her brother had at first suggested that she should confer with Don Lorenzo and himself on the subject of Giacinto. In regard to the latter, the three elders differed considerably in their views, the Prince, as has been seen, very much preferring, for reasons of his own, that nothing should be done that might bring the pontifical authorities into the matter, while Don Lorenzo was equally anxious for a thorough examination to be made of his nephew's condition, so that, if such a thing were ever to be possible at all, Giacinto might be reinstated in his rights and reunited to his lawful wife. As to Donna Olimpia—who was perfectly sure that if Fiordelisa could only be liberated from her marriage ties by an order of the Pope, she would infallibly return of her own accord to the convent of Ursulines—she was as firmly set as was the Bishop

upon Giacinto's being examined by the Cardinal Secretary's doctors, albeit she was convinced that such an examination could have no other result than to demonstrate once for all the hopelessness of Giacinto's case.

So the hot days passed into weeks, and the weeks almost into months, until one afternoon towards the beginning of September, when Fiordelisa, who was trying to beguile the sultry hours with her needle-work in the immense deserted "salone" of the castle, let fall her hands into her lap and gazed out before her across the wide, formal room to the windows. These were open, and through the apertures she could see only the leafy curtain of the fast mellowing woodlands all afire with colour—their green already tinged and stippled with yellow and orange. And, as she sat there staring at their gorgeous motley, an invincible longing took possession of her to be up and doing out among them; to surrender to the noble call of them and to let them minister to her careworn spirit.

For she was beginning to be unspeakably cast down and despondent at the length of time which had now gone by, without bringing her any further message, since her brief glimpse of Teresinella in Sant' Onofrio. She understood, of course, that Teresinella might well have had to go home to Treviglano before being able to carry out her prom-

ise of sending help; but, even so, that she should have sent no word of warning to prepare Fiordelisa for the manner in which the eagerly awaited assistance was to reach her was truly incomprehensible and perturbing. The longer Fiordelisa pondered over Teresinella's silence, the more insistent became her fears lest something untoward might have happened to her—more especially in view of the unsettled conditions which had prevailed during the last two years in Upper Italy by reason of the military operations of the French and Austrian forces in Lombardy and the western part of Venetia. Fiordelisa's domain of Trevigliano, however, was situated in the Euganean hills, some distance south and west from Padua, and so was outside the area of the war. At the same time, none of the roads in the north but were more or less unsafe for solitary travellers on account of robbers and army-stragglers; so that Fiordelisa had reason enough for her fears on Teresinella's account.

Rising from her chair, she looked over to where a tall red and gilt Buhlwork timepiece stood in the corner of the "salone" and saw that the hands marked only three o'clock.

"I will go out for a walk," she decided. "No one will miss me, because if they do not see me, it will be thought that I am lying down in my own room." And picking up a lace veil that she had

been wearing over her hair earlier in the day, from where it hung on the back of the chair, she drew it over her head and tied the ends together under her chin. She had never yet in all her life worn any other head-covering than one of these veils (except that once on the occasion of her marriage), so that she was thoroughly inured to the sun's rays, against which, indeed, her splendid fair hair was more than sufficient protection. After that, she went out on to the staircase and down it to the great courtyard where there was no living thing to be seen saving only a donkey bearing a couple of panniers and tied to a hook in the wall near the main entrance of the castle, a wide archway a dozen feet in depth and high enough for a man on horseback to pass under it. In the centre of the roof was set an iron ring for the purpose of inflicting the torture of the cord, by which a man's hands were bound behind him with a long rope that was passed through the ring; he was then jerked off his feet by means of this rope, so that his arms were brought violently up over his head and wrenched out of their sockets at the shoulders. Prince Bordelacqua still retained the ring in its place, although to his credit be it said that he had but very rarely been known to make use of it.

When Fiordelisa caught sight of the donkey, she stepped back quickly to avoid being seen by anyone who might be about to issue from the door of the

office, which was close to where the animal was standing; for she had no wish that her movements this afternoon should be reported to the Prince, who had strictly forbidden her to go beyond the castle grounds without an attendant. As she stood there, undecided whether to wait longer or to venture quickly across the yard while there was yet time in which to do so unobserved, she saw a young man come out carrying a quantity of vegetables and loaves of bread, together with a large piece of meat, all of which he proceeded to pack into the panniers. This done, he unfastened the donkey and led it leisurely out under the archway, humming a song as he went.

Now Fiordelisa had as yet acquired no exact knowledge of Giacinto's whereabouts; although she knew that he was nowhere within the castle itself, because Don Bartolomeo was with him, and she had not set eyes on Don Bartolomeo since the day of her leaving Rome with Donna Olimpia for Castel Gandolfo. But she had instantly recognized Andrea and she remembered that he had once been Don Bartolomeo's inseparable servant and companion. So she could only conclude that he was still in the priest's service and that the provisions he was taking away with him were intended for the use of Don Bartolomeo and Giacinto. Hence, she had only to follow him to come to the secret place of Giacinto's imprisonment.

Scarcely feeling the ground beneath her feet, Fiordelisa sped across the yard to the archway through which she could see Andrea and the donkey going up the avenue a little way ahead of her. And now the question arose—would it be safe presently to let him know that she had recognised him and was following him? Or was he, too, an agent of the Prince, and would he betray any attempt of hers to get into touch with her husband, and so make matters worse for them both? On the whole, she decided that the wisest course would be to follow him at a distance, although, even if he should become aware of it, it did not by any means follow that he would know her again for the child he had last seen five years before. And she was really almost indifferent as to any risk on her own account, provided only that she could see with her own eyes the house where Giacinto was awaiting her.

So, drawing her veil close around her face, she walked out after Andrea, praying as she went that she might meet with no one who knew her.

Leaving the avenue, Andrea passed on up the road to the right, while Fiordelisa followed in his footsteps, a stone's throw behind. So soon as they were out of sight of the castle entrance, Fiordelisa, breathing more freely, began to hope that he might be inspired to mend his pace a trifle; which he presently did, the steepness of the ascent notwith-

standing, until they had put nearly a mile between themselves and Acquanera.

Once, a little further on, among the woods, Andrea halted to rest himself, while Fiordelisa shrank back behind the trunk of a very old tree, wondering where and when her venture would have an end, and whether or not her absence had yet been discovered by anyone at the castle. Before long, however, Andrea set off once more and she after him, her footfalls sinking deep into the ancient turf. Fiordelisa had never before been so far away from the castle, and it seemed to her even further than it really was. All the same, she had no intention of turning back before she should have seen at least the walls behind which Giacinto was immured, so as to be able to find her way to them again at any time. Also, she was beginning to be afraid of letting herself be carried away by her hopes of actually setting eyes once more upon the man she had been pining so long and ardently to see. Nevertheless, that hope had now suddenly become the greatest thing in the whole world for Fiordelisa, and she knew that, if she were to be disappointed in it, the disappointment would be one of the sharpest pains she had ever yet had to suffer.

More than once the way turned for a considerable distance to the right along the fence of the hills, affording a prospect of long clearings where the

woodcutters and charcoal burners had been at work, or else the lightning and the storms of past years had wrought their accustomed havoc; here, where everything had been scattered or riven or levelled with the ground, there showed a dim vista of far-off landscape framed in greenery and the wreckage of the forest. Miles and miles away through the mists the great cone of Monte Viglio rose shadowy against the sky; and, further still, fainter and lovelier, that of Pizzodeta's fairy stronghold poised like a watch-tower between the heavens and the earth. Everything lay gilded in the strong sunlight, the gently waving trees stirred by a cat's-paw of wind that had just sprung up, the brown patches of rock and arid soil that intermingled now and again with the turf, and the wide and shallow grassy basins which began to take the place of the turf itself as the road ascended higher. Once as Fiordelisa stood on the edge of one of these basins, a great shadow sailed lazily across it in front of her, whereat she closed her eyes and breathed a prayer; for the huge "lammergeier" or bearded vultures, with which she was familiar from having seen them occasionally as a child among the Euganean hills, were then still credited with almost fabulous strength and ferocity.

At last—at last, after an hour's walk, she was within sight of a house-roof behind a high, brick

wall; she had come almost to the end of her quest and was holding herself hidden against an oak, whilst Andrea, with the donkey, was being readmitted by the sentry to the precincts of the farm. As she watched him pass out of view, Fiordelisa's heart sank a moment with a strange sense of utter loneliness that had quite unexpectedly descended upon her; but, the next, she had thrown it off and was peering anxiously at the only window visible to her of the building—that of Giacinto's bedroom.

Heavily barred, it offered no sign of life; from where she stood Fiordelisa could see that the room behind it was very bare and cheerless, with white-washed walls and a low ceiling much smirched in one place with what she judged to be the flame of a lamp or candle. As a matter of fact, this was just over the table where Giacinto was in the habit of sitting at night to read or write in solitude after parting from Don Bartolomeo. Somehow, the unlovely stain seemed to arrest and draw to itself every instinct of Fiordelisa's being; and she kept her eyes fastened on it as though in expectation of seeing it materialize and take frame and become a living thing.

And then, suddenly she understood that the whole force of her intention and her desire was concentrated so irresistibly upon the room behind the barred window as soon to compel some kind of a response

from any human intelligence that there might be in there. And as Fiordelisa realised this, she put out the whole strength of her will in a sustained, supreme effort to communicate with anyone who might be in the room.

Suddenly, too, something caused her to hold her breath and to clasp her hands upon her breast to stay the violent beatings of her heart. For no—there was no doubting it any longer—a second stain, that of a shadow, was unmistakably merging from one side with the flame-mark on the ceiling. There was life there, something which breathed and felt and yearned in unison with her—and as the shadow came on towards Fiordelisa, she bowed her head for an instant in fear of what she might be going to see. Immediately, however, she raised it again—to look straight into the eyes of someone—a man in puce-coloured clothes who was standing there, gazing at her with an appalled intensity that transfixed her as with a sword. His face was of a shade with his sad-coloured clothes and his eyes seemed to burn into her being.

She saw that he was trying to persuade himself of the actuality of his vision—that he had recognised her at first more by intuition than by any physical means, and that he was striving to grasp with the eyes of the body what he saw with those of the spirit. As for Fiordelisa, it was much the same with

her as with the man in the window; she knew who it was that she was looking at and yet she had, as it were, to feed long and avidly upon his features in order to assure herself that it was indeed he and no other upon whom she was looking. So overwhelming were her amazement and joy, together with the divine exhilaration of a pre-satisfied curiosity, that, oblivious of risks, she came out unhesitatingly into the open and stood there, her hands still clasped upon her breast, the name of her beloved on her lips.

“Giacinto—Oh, Giacinto——”

As she said it, a quick change came into Giacinto’s face; the wild glow of the interior fires which were consuming him broke through the clay-like mask of his first astonished incredulity at the apparition of her. His mouth, which had been closed, opened slightly and he attempted to speak, although no sound reached Fiordelisa. But she knew what it was that he was trying to say—just her name and only that, but it was enough for her.

Signaling to him to have patience, she felt about her for something on which to trace a message; but found only her handkerchief. Pencil she had none; nor any means of making fire with which to char a fragment of wood for purposes of writing. In her distress she caught sight of the long, sharp pin of the brooch then in fashion for securing the

ends of the veil below the throat when out-of-doors, and at once her resolve was taken. Unfastening the ornament, she drew it out and turned away so that Giacinto should not see what she was about to do. Then she stretched the handkerchief tightly over a flat stone and fastened down the corners of it with others so as to make a surface for writing; after which she laid the point of the brooch-pin against the back of her left thumb; hesitated for the fraction of a moment; and then thrust it quickly into the soft flesh so that a great blot of crimson welled up through the puncture. So surprisingly acute was the pain that Fiordelisa had to bite her lips to keep from uttering a cry of anguish; but there was no time to lose, and, dipping a twig in the blood, she continued to write across the handkerchief a few words: "Courage. Soon together. All arranged."

When she had finished she found a few fair-sized pebbles and tied them in the handkerchief, and then turned once more towards the house. Giacinto was still standing in the window, a look of adoring love upon his face, and she went through a show of throwing the handkerchief over the wall, to which he replied with gestures signifying that she should wait before doing so until he had come down into the garden.

So she waited; until presently a little stone came tumbling through the air to fall close to her feet;

when she tossed her missive over the wall, and presently heard Giacinto's smothered exclamation as he undid and read it. There followed a brief pause for Fiordelisa, broken by the sound of footsteps and of a well-remembered voice, that of Don Bartolomeo Prinetti speaking to Giacinto. She did not catch the reply, but the two moved off, apparently, together, and although Fiordelisa lingered for some time in the hope either of seeing Giacinto or of hearing his voice she was soon compelled to begin retracing her way to Acquanera. Slowly and very thoughtfully she went, divided between the ecstatic delight of having seen and heard Giacinto and her uneasiness at Teresinella's silence.

"Have I, perhaps, only raised false hopes in his heart?" she asked herself. "And will his suffering be only made a thousand times worse by disappointment? And yet, no—somehow I cannot help feeling certain that all is going to go well for us. Ah, dear God—surely we have been unhappy enough now—surely the time has come for us to be happy together for a little while?" she whispered to the hot sky that shimmered overhead between the arching chestnut branches.

In less than an hour she was back in the avenue leading to the castle; to her dismay, though, and confusion, on striking into it from the road she saw that Anton Stürmli was standing at the end of it by

the archway through which she must pass in order to enter the court-yard. She saw, too, that he had seen her, so that there was nothing for it but to face him boldly and to go by as though there were no reason why she should not come and go precisely as she pleased. As she went by him he paid her his customary formal salute without evincing the least sign of surprise; although, as Fiordelisa was well aware, he knew that she must have been beyond the bounds assigned her by Prince Bordelacqua.

Therefore she was not surprised in her turn when, after supper that evening, as she was walking with her father-in-law in the garden, he took occasion to remark in his softest manner:

“I trust I am not tiring you, my dear, by availing myself of your company on my little promenade? Because, if I am not mistaken, you have already had considerable exercise to-day.”

“It is true that I went by myself for a walk this afternoon,” answered Fiordelisa, “but I am not very tired. I hope,” she felt it best to add, “you will not blame me too severely for doing so. The truth is, I simply could not resist the temptation to get a breath of air——”

“I quite understand; it is like that, sometimes, when one is young. No, I do not blame you. Only, I hope you will not do it again without letting me know beforehand of your intention—because the

countryside is really unsafe. There are gipsies about, and brigands too, who might take you away with them and hold you for ransom. Or they might even do worse than that to you——”

“In what way?” asked Fiordelisa. “But are you not laughing at me, *Compare?*”—for so she had fallen into the habit of addressing him when they were alone; this she did with the object of keeping him in a good humour.

“No, I am not laughing at you, dear daughter—what I meant was that they might sell you into slavery, perhaps, to some rich man of the Moors in Africa. I have heard of such things as happening to young gentlewomen before now. And so I entreat you to bear in mind my words, Fiordelisa. By the way, where did you go, this afternoon, my dear?”

Fiordelisa explained that she had gone up a little way into the hills behind the castle; that she had particularly enjoyed the view of the Neapolitan heights—as she took them to be. She told him also of how she had been frightened by the “rocchione” as she termed, in the language of her nursery days—the Italian that was smattered with Greek and Turkish and even Persian words—the great bird of prey which had hovered over her.

To which Prince Bordelacqua nodded sympathetically, satisfied to all appearance by her account

of her movements. But, from that day forth, whenever, as may be imagined, happened pretty frequently, Fiordelisa chanced to attempt a second expedition to the farm, she invariably found either Stürmlì or one of his men waiting for her at the entrance arch of the castle and ready with the offer of an escort—which, it need hardly be said, was as invariably declined with thanks and the assurance that she had no desire, just then, to go beyond the limit of the gardens.

Until at length the hour came for Prince Borde-lacqua to return for a couple of days to Rome to take part in the family council that was, for the present, at all events, to decide the fate of Giacinto; but this was not until nearly another month had gone by after Fiordelisa's surreptitious discovery of the place of Giacinto's concealment. In those weeks her depression on account of Teresinella's silence remained with her and had gone on increasing until, at times, it seemed almost as though she could no longer continue to carry the load of it unassisted. But, since there was no one to whom she could confide her desperate anxiety, her mortal fears, lest Teresinella should have been prevented by some ill chance from keeping her word, Fiordelisa had no choice but to wrestle with them in solitude and darkness, in something of the same way that Jacob contended for the mastery with the unknown angel.

Moreover, her own misgivings were indescribably augmented by the thought of what must be Giacinto's frame of mind as the weeks succeeded one another, bringing no further sign of life to him from the outside world.

It was on the golden last morning of September that Prince Bordelacqua set out in his coach for Rome, leaving Fiordelisa and Cesare—rather to the surprise of the former, who had expected that he would take Cesare with him for propriety's sake—in charge of the Chaplain, Father Ogniben, who supplied his patron's place for the time being towards the household. To be sure, Fiordelisa had her two maids to look after her; but, as the duenna engaged for her benefit by the Prince had not yet been able to take up her duties at Acquanera, the girl now found herself, comparatively speaking, her own mistress. Hence, it seemed to her she might well contrive an opportunity to make a second visit to Giacinto's prison—if not by day, then, perhaps, by night, when all the castle world would be safely asleep. She felt no fear for herself, so far as the long solitary walk to the farm was concerned, but only on account of the fact that the doors guarding the entrance to the castle would inevitably be closed, according to the rule, between ten o'clock of the night

and four the next morning. So that she must manage, somehow, to evade the vigilance of the halberdier on duty at the archway at about the same time of day at which she had once before succeeded in stealing away unobserved. And, as there would be only two days altogether in which to do so before Prince Bordelacqua's return from Rome to Acquanera, Fiordelisa saw that she must act quickly if she wished to obtain another glimpse of Giacinto within a definite period of time.

The day of the Prince's departure was the thirtieth of September; and he was to be back at Acquanera on the evening of the second of October. So that, as Andrea had once foretold to Teresinella, the day of the completion of the vintage—when the last load of grapes had been pressed in blue-black liquid into the vats—fell during his absence, that is to say on the first Sunday of October, which was also the first day of the month, the entire night of which day would be passed by the peasants of Acquanera in dancing and carousing about the wine-presses down in the village. With them would mingle undoubtedly many, if not all, of the servants and men-at-arms from the castle, so that the approaches to the place would be left practically unguarded. Herein, as Fiordelisa saw clearly, lay her one chance of making a nocturnal visit to the farm without being discovered by anyone in the act.

The first two days of Prince Bordelacqua's absence were spent by her just as she had spent the rest of the days that summer, between her needle-work, a book of devotions and walking in the gardens, or else in playing to herself on the clavichord that stood in a dim corner of the immense, rather forbidding "salone," where the air was heavy with the savour of masses of roses and of lilies-of-the-valley that were bestowed in bowls on all sides for her pleasure by the especial orders of the Prince. On the evening of the second day, Fiordelisa excused herself to Cesare and Father Ogniben as soon as supper was over, and withdrew to her own apartment, leaving them as was their wont, to talk awhile at the table before adjourning to the billiard-room for a game which was not unlike a sort of table-croquet, the balls being driven with broad curved cues through arches from a starting-post.

On the way upstairs from the dining-hall, Fiordelisa noticed with thankfulness that the castle was already beginning to show signs of emptying for the festivities in the village, which had been in progress ever since the conclusion of the Sunday Mass that morning. Indeed, the only servants she met with were a single serving-man—old Sebastiano, the butler, being busy in the dining-hall—on the stairs, and the twins, her maids, who were preparing their mistress' room for the night. Them she dismissed to

their supper, saying that they need not trouble to return to her later on as she would put herself to bed when she felt disposed. Fortunately, they did not, as they had done in Rome, occupy the room next her bedroom, but one at the end of a short passage from it; so that she could come and go unnoticed by them.

It was about half an hour, however, before she could bring herself to venture upon issuing once more from her room and going downstairs again to the door opening into the courtyard; to her joy the place seemed entirely deserted—which, after all, was not really very strange, considering that in reality the domestic discipline of Acquanera had departed with its master, to return only with his return. Not a soul except Fiordelisa herself appeared to be about; for, truth to tell, of the Prince's entire establishment only the Chaplain, who was with Don Cesare, and the butler, who was eating his supper with the twins, had not taken advantage of their lord's absence to join the merrymakers in the village.

Gathering up her skirts in order to move more freely, Fiordelisa made rapidly across the deserted moonlit yard to the dark entrance arch on the far side, her heart beating wildly lest she should find there some dreaded sentry ready to check her further advance.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH the archway Fiordelisa could see a strip of clouded night-sky, pale and almost watery, framed between the vaulted roof and the tops of the chestnut trees. Out there all was hoary in the moonlight save for a wide border of shadow thrown by the trees on to the avenue; but the archway itself was thick in gloom, so that for a moment Fiordelisa failed to make out someone in a cloak, close against the masonry and almost indistinguishable from it by reason of the darkness.

No sooner was she aware of a presence there than she came to a halt, her throat palpitating horribly in the conviction that her design had somehow been discovered and frustrated. Also, the terror of she knew not what revengeful snare of Bordelacqua's took possession of her.

“Who is that?” she demanded, scarcely above a whisper, and in a voice so altered with alarm that it sounded to her like that of a stranger.

To which another whisper answered, “It is I, Lady—your servant, Gozzoli. There is nothing to fear. I am come to you from the North—from Trevigliano. May God have you always in His keeping.”

And then Fiordelisa understood that Teresinella had kept her word when she had said that she would send her a man. Fiordelisa had long forgotten Salvatore Gozzoli; but now she remembered him far more clearly than, for the time being, she could remember anything else in all her life,—which seemed in truth to have become suddenly all blurred and vague by comparison with her startlingly vivid recollection of the ex-captain of halberdiers. Groping instinctively in search of something by which to support herself in the overwhelming reaction of relief which succeeded to her first panic, Fiordelisa's hand came into contact with Gozzoli's; he was holding out some object towards her, a woman's hooded cloak, which he had produced from beneath his own.

“Excuse me,” he murmured, laying it deftly upon her shoulders so that it fell to her feet, completely concealing her dress. “Please take the comb out of your hair,—so—if you will forgive the liberty—” and, rolling up the girl's hair completely, he drew the cloak over her head. “Keep the skirts from flapping, Lady, and take care to speak no word as we go. It is not far—only to the wood beyond the highroad at the end of the avenue.”

Fiordelisa had no time in which to ask him any questions, either as to how he had got to Acquanera or as to his connection with her home; no time,

even, to ask them of herself, or to feel much surprise. She had understood at once that Gozzoli was to deliver her, together with Giacinto, out of Prince Bordelacqua's hands; that Gozzoli was solely responsible in the matter, and that to refuse him the unhesitating obedience he demanded might be to imperil everything. Moreover, the knowledge that the whole safety and welfare of her beloved and herself were in the keeping of this courteously masterful and resolute man of violence was balm to her weariness. And so, without a word, she turned her face from Acquanera at his bidding and walked out by his side under the archway into the moonlit avenue of chestnut-trees.

“This way——” and Gozzoli took her by the arm, leading her along close under the trees and away from the avenue itself. After that he did not speak again until they had left the avenue for the highroad, but she could hear him breathing heavily through his nostrils as they went.

“*Gloria tibi, Domine,*” she heard him mutter, when at last they had crossed the road and were entering the small copse on the further side of it. In silence they continued on their way over the soundless turf in and out the dense, yielding foliage to a clearing where a couple of horses were tethered to different trees. From off the back of the smaller ani-

mal, a barb of a flea-bitten grey in colour, Gozzoli untied a large bundle concealing the saddle, and gave it to Fiordelisa.

“Here is a riding-habit for you, Lady,” he said, “also a hood and gloves and a pair of doeskin boots. My wife, Teresinella, you know, hoped they would fit you as she took the measurements for them from a pair of your Lady mother’s——” with the ghost of a smile, for hitherto he had not had occasion to mention the fact of his marriage to Teresinella on her recent return from Acquanera to Savigliano. “While you are putting them on, I will do what remains to be done,” nodding in the direction of the castle. “I will be back soon.” And with that he left her.

In his absence, Fiordelisa addressed herself, with fingers trembling from excitement, to the task of changing her clothes for those she found in the bundle. Meanwhile, the horses browsed unconcernedly near by, their steady cropping the only sound that broke the stillness, save for an occasional faint echo of string-music and song borne upon the breeze from the distant wine-presses down by the village.

Fiordelisa had scarcely finished before Gozzoli made his reappearance, leading a third horse—no other indeed, than Don Cesare’s blue roan, Balthazar, which his uncle, the Bishop, had given him in

reward for application to the study of Dante's Divine Comedy.

"They shall have him back when we have done with him," said Gozzoli, knotting Balthazar's bridle to a sapling. Then putting together Fiordelisa's discarded garments in a piece of canvas which had served to hold those she was now wearing, he tied the bundle behind the saddle of his own horse, a powerful brown, before unfastening the grey barb and leading it towards her.

"All you will need to do is to hold him," he cautioned, as he gave the reins into her hand which she laid upon the pommel of the saddle, putting her foot at the same time into Gozzoli's palm, which he held out to receive it. Before hoisting the girl he bent his head and kissed the little foot in its covering of white doeskin in token of fealty; then a quick spring and she was in the saddle. Having arranged her skirts for her and tightened the girth Gozzoli mounted the brown and edged over to the roan, which he unfastened, slipping the rein over his arm.

"By your permission I will go in front," he said, moving off. It was not until they were on the high-road that Fiordelisa noticed that the feet of all three horses were swathed in wrappings so that they made hardly any noise at all, even when, presently, Gozzoli shook the brown into a canter. Up the winding

way the riders went, the dust rising in puffs at every muffled hoof-stroke, until gradually the landscape began to alter, and the fortress of Acquanera, below and behind them, looked like a white rock in the dark sea of chestnut woods. Even now at intervals, it seemed to Fiordelisa that there came up to her some dim reverberation of the merrymaking of the rioters about the wine-presses; and she caught herself actually listening for it, for as yet she was still unable to concentrate her thoughts upon the business of the night. She had been so long a prey to alternate hopes and forebodings that she could not easily bring her mind to bear upon the possibilities that had, so utterly unexpectedly, sprung into being for her within the hour. There was for her, too, a certain unreality about the situation, by reason of her having never before imagined anything like it—this ride by night into the hills in the wake of Teresinella's husband—for had not Gozzoli spoken of Teresinella as his wife? Had it not been for the movement of the barb and the wind on her face, Fiordelisa could almost have believed herself to be in a dream.

At the place where the highroad was joined by the steeper track leading to the farm, Gozzoli pulled his horse into a walk. Glancing over his shoulder, he threw a few words of encouragement to his companion.

"It goes well, lady," he said, pointing to the sky. "The wind is holding off the rain, so they will not be disturbed in their drinking down there behind us for some hours to come."

Fiordelisa, though, had just remembered the halberdier whom she had seen open the gates of the farm to Andrea.

"But—the soldiers?" she queried. "Up there at the farm? What about them? How will you—"

Gozzoli reassured her with a shake of the head. "There is nothing to fear from them," he said. "They are all enjoying themselves in the village, except one, one who was left behind to keep watch at the gate and to let them in when they come back. As for Stürmli, he is busy with the horses all this week—it is the time of the fair. Also, speaking with respect, he is courting the innkeeper's daughter at Capistrello. What I would ask is—were you supposed to have retired for the night when I met you in the gate? If not, we must hurry."

"Yes, I was supposed to have gone to bed," answered Fiordelisa, rather shamefacedly.

"Good. There is no danger then, you see, of your being missed and of somebody's raising an alarm. Likewise, they will not know that I have borrowed the horses from the stables until to-morrow morning—all the stablemen are naturally amus-

ing themselves with the rest round the wine-presses—again speaking with respect."

It was beginning to become plain to Fiordelisa that her prayers had been really heard and that the miracle for which she had stormed Heaven was in process of accomplishment.

"And—and Don Giacinto?" she asked. "Does he know that—that we are coming?"

"No. Don Giacinto does not know," Gozzoli admitted. "But that makes no difference. You will see."

As they breasted the rough track, Gozzoli relapsed into a watchful silence. He was no longer afraid of anyone's coming upon them from behind; but of what might lie in front he had reason to be exceedingly cautious. Should they chance to fall in with somebody who would recognize either Fiordelisa or the roan, it would add greatly to the uncertainty of their success.

As Gozzoli had said to Fiordelisa, the fact that Don Giacinto did not know of what was going on made no difference; because Gozzoli had laid his plans without reference to any positive participation on Giacinto's part.

Presently he turned in his saddle and beckoned to Fiordelisa to ride up alongside of him.

"Lady Princess, we are now, I think, only about a mile distant from the farm," he said. "When we

shall have gone on yet another half mile, or so, we will dismount and tether the horses among the trees. Then we will walk; and, as we walk, we will sing—as the peasants sing. The soldier on guard was not of those in the service of Casa Bordelacqua in my day; so he will not recognize me when I offer him a pull from my bottle through the bars of the gateway"—indicating a leather jug at his saddle-bow. "Also, it stands to reason that he will have to come close to the bars to take the bottle from my hand. Do you follow me?"

"I—I think I do. You mean that we are to pretend to be persons of the people on our way home from the festivity in the vineyards. That is why we are to sing, is it not—to disarm any suspicion of the sentry's? And when you give him to drink—what then?"

"Then—and remember to keep out of sight against the wall, behind me—as he takes the bottle from me, I shall catch his wrist. The rest will be easy."

"You will not hurt him—"

"No more than I can help. But we cannot afford to take any risks. And now, with your permission, we will press on a little way."

Before long they came to the spot where Teresinella had met Andrea, and where the dense chestnut-trees made a sort of screen by the wayside. Here

Gozzoli dismounted and lifted Fiordelisa from the back of the barb and secured the three horses to different trees. He was wearing a soft, felt hat, the high crown of which he punched outwards with his fist, so that, seen against the sky, it looked not unlike one of the tall pointed hats worn by the herdsmen round Rome. Then he drew from his pocket a length of fine cord of about the thickness of a child's little finger and made a loop of it with a running knot; this he gave to Fiordelisa.

"When you see me draw the sentry by the arm up against the gate, take the loop in both your hands and slip it over his head," he instructed her. "Then pull the noose tight, instantly, and hold on to it. If you do exactly as I tell you, Lady, I shall not have to hurt him—much. Otherwise, I shall be obliged—" tapping the hilt of a knife at his waist significantly.

Fiordelisa took the wicked-looking cord from him, controlling her repulsion as well as she could. There was no pain she would not gladly have done her utmost to endure for Giacinto's sake; but there was something very dreadful to her in the thought of inflicting perhaps the most frightful suffering upon a helpless fellow-creature, such as she foresaw the halberdier would be when Gozzoli should have his hands upon him.

"Lady, do you know '*Luisa ch' andó confesarsi?*'" asked Gozzoli, not without embarrassment;

the song was one of the least rough of all in his repertory; even so, he was not quite at his ease, in naming it to a lady of Fiordelisa's nobility.

"I have heard Don Cesare sing it," said she, "but I do not remember all the words. Still, if you will sing it, Sor Salvatore, I will do my best to help."

And so they started upon their song, Gozzoli leading and Fiordelisa joining her voice to his in the jolly chorus, whilst the wind soughed an accompaniment among the leafy trees. They did not sing loud, but their voices were carried before them by the wind at their backs, and when they had come to the end of the song they simply began once more until they had sung it again and again. Just as they finished singing it for the third or fourth time, they turned the corner of the path and came into sight of the high walled enclosure about the farm—its old brickwork all a warm flesh-colour in the moonlight.

"*Se fossi io il tuo pretin!*'" Gozzoli trolled on in his rich baritone voice, shrinking close to the wall as he advanced along it as though he were a trifle unsteady on his feet. At the same time he motioned behind him with his hand to Fiordelisa to keep out of sight. For her part she was feeling rather sick, what with suppressed excitement and the thought of what she had to do; nevertheless, although she had ceased to sing, she forced herself to inspect the cord she was carrying, so as to make sure that the slip-

knot was in perfect working order, and that the noose was large enough to go quickly over a man's head.

Seeing that Gozzoli had reached the gate, she stood still a yard or so in his rear, her shoulders pressed flat against the wall, and waited for what was to come, her whole frame rigid, and her fingers holding the noose in readiness.

"*Ohé!*!" she heard him call below his breath to someone; there followed the quick grunt of a man roused out of a light slumber, and the shuffling of his feet as he rose from where he had been sitting.

"Who is it?" asked the sentry. And then, irritably—"Go away—get out of this and be fried to you! As though it was not enough—that I should have to stay in this accursed place while everyone is gone off to the vintage—without being pestered by every drunkard who passes! Get out of this, I say——"

Gozzoli, however, was already proffering the leather bottle to him, holding it about a foot from the bars.

"Take a pull, my dear, there is nothing to be angry about," he said. "Just to show there is no ill-feeling. There——"

For a second the other seemed to Fiordelisa to hesitate.

"Well, if you will not——" and Gozzoli made as though to withdraw his offer; seeing which, the man

on the inside of the gate stepped up to it and thrust his right arm between the bars to take the bottle.

“Wait a moment——” he was beginning, when Gozzoli, letting fall the bottle, seized the outstretched arm and twisted it over his shoulder, so that the sentry’s head, in his effort to avoid the fracture of the limb at the elbow, was brought sideways against the gate. Thus, he was powerless either to move or to reach his adversary with the other hand.

“Now!” said Gozzoli to Fiordelisa, adding to the halberdier——“Do not stir or you will have only one arm for the rest of your life—if I let you live at all.”

Even as he spoke, Fiordelisa had come round him and, rising on the tips of her toes, had passed the cord between the bars and over the sentry’s head.

“Pull it tight,” ordered Gozzoli, “I will tell you when to stop. “That will do,” as the sentry’s breath was forced from him in a thin whistle through his windpipe.

“Hold it so, until I can take the ends of the cord from you——so——”

Fiordelisa’s knuckles were white with the unaccustomed strain and the sweat was running freely down her face in spite of the cool October night. But Gozzoli was now tying the overpowered sentry by the neck to the bars. Having done this, he drew his

knife and placing the point of it against the swollen, purple neck, told the man to give him the key of the gate if he had it on him; otherwise, he explained, he would first kill him and then climb the gate and find the key for himself—than which nothing could be easier. Happily, though, the key was where it ought to be, hanging on the sentry's waist-belt; so that it was only the work of a minute for Fiordelisa to unbuckle the belt at Gozzoli's bidding and to draw the key from off it and unlock the gate, which creaked shrilly as Gozzoli pushed it back and his prisoner with it.

"Put your arms behind you, through the bars," he told the man, who obeyed unresistingly, and Gozzoli strapped them together above the elbows; after which he passed in with Fiordelisa and they went over to the door of the house, which was bolted on the outside, but had only a latch to fasten it on the other.

Once inside, as they stood at the foot of the stairs, Gozzoli motioned to Fiordelisa to precede him, which she did, and so they reached the door of the living-room, which they opened and crossed quickly to that of the next—Don Bartolomeo's room. Upon this door Fiordelisa was about to knock but Gozzoli threw it open impatiently over her shoulder, and passed on in front of her to the bed which stood full in the moonlight.

As Don Bartolomeo opened his eyes, they fell upon the figure of Gozzoli outlined sharply against the luminous whiteness. Since he could not distinguish the man's face, the priest took him for Anton Stürmlì, and his mind leaped to the conclusion that evil was abroad in the night.

"How now——" he began angrily, sitting upright in the bed; and then his glance took in Fiordelisa over by the entrance to Giacinto's room. "A woman! What is this?" he cried, but without attempting to rise.

"Sir Priest," said Gozzoli, "you have nothing to fear from us. I am the servant of Donna Fiordelisa Bordelacqua, and we are come to take Don Giacinto away with us. I was formerly known to your Reverence. I am Salvatore Gozzoli."

Don Bartolomeo knew him now, well enough.

"I remember you," he said sternly. "You had a hand in many things. But, unless you take care, this will be the worst night's work for you that ever you put hand to——"

"I intend to take care," said Gozzoli.

"You are breaking the law," pursued Don Bartolomeo, "in abducting one who is, legally speaking, a ward of our lord the Pope. Think it over—are you perfectly sure you are ready to die of a mace-blow on the bridge of Sant' Angelo?"

But Gozzoli only shrugged his shoulders without answering. He knew that Don Bartolomeo felt it his duty to speak thus as being in charge of Don Giacinto, and that no one would be better pleased than the priest if Don Giacinto should make good his escape.

In the intention of arousing Giacinto, Fiordelisa had gone swiftly into the next room and straight up to the bed where he lay asleep, one arm thrown over his head, his lips pouting slightly as though he were displeased at something in his dreams. Kneeling down, she twined her arms about his neck and laid her mouth upon his so that he awoke. There they remained awhile, gazing into each other's eyes without moving until Giacinto gasped:

"Fiordelisa—what does it mean? What has happened? How did you get here?"

Just then Gozzoli put his head in at the door.

"Make haste, please, to dress yourself, Don Giacinto," he urged. "It is I—Gozzoli; there is no time to lose. We have many miles to ride before morning."

Thereupon, Fiordelisa released her hold of Giacinto, who, still dazed, raised himself to a sitting position.

"Those are the only clothes I have—over there on the chair," he said, pointing to it by the window. "Will you bring them to me, Fiordelisa?"

When she had brought them, she left him and went back to Gozzoli.

“He has no riding-boots,” she said.

“I will buy him a pair, later on,” replied Gozzoli. “Let him put on anything he has, now; only let him be quick about it. Here is a cloak”—taking one down from a peg on the wall near by. “This must be his, I think, and this must be his hat.”

Already Giacinto was emerging from the next room; he was fumbling in frantic haste at the buttons of his waistcoat, his dark curling hair all ruffled from the pillows, and his feet shod in a pair of heavy walking shoes. Gozzoli put the cloak on his shoulders and gave him the hat, then, with a civil farewell to Don Bartolomeo, he went downstairs, in the wake of the young couple, who forgot even to turn their heads towards the old Chaplain, and out of the house, taking the precaution of bolting the door behind him again. The sentry was just as Gozzoli had left him; as they went out through the open gate, Gozzoli paused to loosen the cord about the man’s neck somewhat, and to tell him that there was no lack of employment and good pay for fighting men in the north, where war had broken out between the French on one side and the Emperor on the other.

As the three fugitives made what haste they could to reach their horses, Giacinto did not ask any questions, nor did Gozzoli offer to enlighten him as to

how these things had come about. Fiordelisa, too, found it beyond her to do more than keep up with the two men the while she walked beside her husband, her arm linked in his, so that he drew her after him.

When at last, she and Giacinto were in their saddles, Gozzoli, before getting into his own, removed the wrappings from the horses' feet, lest they should draw the suspicion of anyone who saw them. Then he mounted and set off again, the others following him, at a brisk walk up the rough hill-road.

"We must spare the horses all we can until we strike the highway towards Avezzano," he said. "By daylight we ought to be in Rieti, and they will have to kill a horse or two to overtake us after that."

After riding in silence some way, Fiordelisa turned to Giacinto and laid a hand upon his. He was looking straight before him, his eyes wide open and fixed wonderingly upon the night and the woods, as though he were stunned by what was happening to him. When he felt the touch of Fiordelisa's fingers on his, he started violently and caught her hand to him and held it against his heart. But he could not speak; and, on looking closer into his face, Fiordelisa saw that his eyes were bright with tears of gladness and the pent-up yearnings of the years. So she did not move her hand from where it lay upon his breast, but only tried to soothe him in a whisper.

“Darling, it is all over now,” she told him, “the long, cruel imprisonment and separation. Henceforth you shall never be parted again from Fiordelisa, who is going to spend her whole life making up to you for all the loneliness and the heartaches you have had to suffer. Oh, my dear—but Fiordelisa has wanted you so that she has sometimes thought to die of it—Fiordelisa understands, oh so well, so well!”

CHAPTER XII

IT was dawn before the rest of the halberdiers, after spending the night in carousing with the people of Acquanera and the neighbouring village, returned to the farm in the hills. As they strolled leisurely up the stony cart-track through the chestnut trees there came a greyness into the sky ahead of them over the crest of the mighty wooded cliffs where these fell away to the lowlands between the Liris and the Salto. The eastern horizon, above which were visible on a fine day the snow-caps of the Majella and the Gran Sasso, was now hidden beneath white banks of fog that had risen from off the Lake of Fucino and were drifting slowly westward over the whole central range of the Sabines. It was cold, too, and the returning revellers drew up the collars of their frieze coats about their ears as the wet mist struck upon their throats.

There were only three of them, and one—who was called “Ste’,” his name being Stephen—was walking a little way in advance of the others, Tobia and Sandro, so that they lost sight of him when presently he turned the last corner in the road and drew near the wall enclosing the farm. Almost instantly they heard him give a loud cry, and ran for-

ward to come upon him as he was tugging at the bonds of him whom Gozzoli had left pinioned, hours earlier, to the gate. Such was their consternation that they could find no words in which to voice it as, between them, the three unfastened their comrade, who was unconscious from the cold and the strain of remaining so long in one position, and bore him into the guardhouse at the upper end of the garden. There they laid him on his bed; after which they went out again into the dawn to ascertain the full extent of what had taken place during their absence since the evening before.

“ My brothers,” said Ste’, as he eyed the house by the gate, “ it is my belief that we are going to find the nest empty.”

“ If so, then we had better all look out for ourselves,” rejoined Tobia, who was a Neapolitan. “ As for me, I have decided I shall go back into the kingdom and take the Viceroy’s money.”

“ It is as good as the Prince’s,” agreed Sandro, “ but, unfortunately, there is less of it for each man. Also there is a great deal of work to be done for it.”

“ But how could they have managed to truss up poor Pepino in that way?” asked Tobia of Ste’. “ An ecclesiastic, a sacristan and a young gentleman —and without so much as a pointed knife between the three of them! ”

"Let us examine into this," said Ste'. "I see the door is bolted."

No sooner had he shot the bolts and opened the door than the voice of Don Bartolomeo called from above, asking who it might be.

"Your Reverence, it is I—Ste'. What has happened?"

Don Bartolomeo made his appearance, taper in hand, at the top of the stairs and stood there, looking down for a moment on the group of chapfallen boon-companions before answering.

"Don Giacinto has escaped," he said at length. "They came in the beginning of the night and took him away with them—Donna Fiordelisa and Gozzoli, who used to be captain of the guard. How was it that they were able to do so?"

Ste' could only mutter something as to the village festivities and that it had been long since he or the other two delinquents had a holiday, and so—

"And so it was—I see. Well, but has there been none of you on watch, then, all these hours?"

Ste' told him how they had left Pepino and had found him again senseless and tied to the gate.

"We have laid him on his bed," he concluded. "And now the question is—what next? It seems to me it will be best for each to take care of himself. Don Giacinto has a long start of us; if we go down

to Acquanera with the news of his flight, we shall only deprive ourselves of the same advantage."

" You mean that you have all decided on making your own escape in order to evade the consequences of your breach of discipline," said Don Bartolomeo.
" It appears that you are wise in your generation. But for me there is a duty to be done. I must notify Prince Bordelacqua immediately of what has happened."

" The Prince is in Rome," put in Sandro. " He is not expected to return to Acquanera until to-night. Hence, your Reverence will either have to wait or else to go to meet him on the road without delay—and to do so you will need a horse, and a good one at that, in order to make any difference in the time of his coming."

" Still, I must do my duty," the priest persisted vaguely. As he saw clearly, it was open to him either to get word, somehow, to Bordelacqua along the road, so as to enable him to hasten his arrival, or else to order and organize an immediate pursuit of Fiordelisa and Giacinto by his own initiative without waiting to consult the Prince at all. On second thoughts, though, the futility of embarking upon this last course, without the requisite signed and sealed authority of the Papal Secretary of State to support his action, became apparent to Don Bartolomeo. So

he determined, instead, to get into touch as quickly as might be with the Prince.

“And when do you think of setting out?” he inquired of the three halberdiers.

“I shall be ready within the hour,” said Ste’.

“And I too,” “And I,” said Tobia and Sandro in the same breath; and Tobia added: “Also, Pepino will be ready by then, I think, to use his legs again. He and I go the same road—by Avezzano and Sulmona, so I shall be able to help him along.” As he said this, Tobia backed out of the house into the yard. It had occurred to him that it might be of considerable benefit to Pepino and himself if they were to borrow Don Bartolomeo’s donkey, Eleabthona, which Andrea used to lead down for provisions to Acquanera.

So that when, an hour later, the halberdiers having taken themselves off, the old priest came to look for Eleabthona, it was only to find the stable empty.

Without wasting his time in vain regrets, however, Don Bartolomeo set out on the spot for Acquanera. Once there, as he reminded himself, his responsibility would be at an end when he should have placed the matter in the hands of someone able to sit a horse well enough to gallop twenty miles or so over a rough country to meet the Prince and inform him of what had taken place in the night. Until then, Don Bartolomeo could know no peace, for his was an al-

most painfully conscientious nature, and he felt answerable rather to the Pope and to the Cardinal Secretary than to Prince Bordelacqua for Giacinto's safekeeping. It was due to no fault of his that the young man's escape had been effected, but to that of the men-at-arms who had since sought safety in flight; but it would certainly be his fault if the pursuit were needlessly delayed. And so he tore down, hot-foot, through the hills toward the castle, with Andrea at his heels. With it all, though, Don Bartolomeo could not help hoping that the young couple might succeed in outdistancing their pursuers—as, indeed, looked already to be actually the case.

On reaching Acquanera, panting and dishevelled, he found Don Cesare and Father Ogniben in animated talk with Anton Stürmli, who had chanced to return to the castle that morning from the horse fair at Capistrello. The three were standing in the courtyard and Don Cesare was gesticulating vigorously as he demanded that Stürmli should at once apply himself to the recovery of the blue roan horse, Balthazar.

“This day—this hour—he is to be brought back here!” he shouted furiously, as Don Bartolomeo came near. “If I am kept waiting for him until tomorrow, the pig who stole him shall be torn with pincers—he shall be put to the cord——”

At this point Father Ogniben, seeing Don Bartolo-

meo coming towards them, was about to interrupt the flow of Cesare's threats, when Stürmli, glancing up, took in the old man's appearance with a questioning eye.

"Your Reverence brings news, perhaps——" he began and then stopped short, checked somewhat by the manner of Don Bartolomeo, who had come to a halt and was leaning heavily upon Andrea, his countenance all drawn and haggard with shock and anxiety and the physical distress of running. In truth he was too spent to say anything at all at first, and yet his very muteness seemed to speak; so that Stürmli went up to him and asked roughly:

"What is it? Has anything gone wrong up there?"—jerking his thumb over his shoulder. "Is he dead?"—meaning Don Giacinto. For Stürmli had already taken command of the situation as his master's deputy, and so he spoke as one having authority. Moreover, the others, including even Don Cesare, struck dumb by his words, deferred to the man of action in him in face of the emergency that had suddenly overtaken them.

Don Bartolomeo, though, could as yet only shake his head; and so Andrea spoke for him.

"Don Giacinto is not dead, no," he said. "But he has escaped; *Donna Fiordelisa*——"

At that moment, while his listeners were staring open-mouthed at him, and just as Stürmli had rapped

out an oath in German, Maria Curletti came running into the courtyard towards them followed by her twin, Giulietta, wringing her hands and crying out that Donna Fiordelisa was lost, that her bed had not been occupied in the night and that she must have been decoyed by the gipsies and carried away for ransom.

“Hold your mouth,” Stürmli ordered her. “And you, finish your report”—to Andrea. Stürmli himself, in spite of his sunburned skin, was white to the lips with consternation and dismay at the responsibility which had thus been thrown upon him of defending Prince Bordelacqua’s interests from the calamity that threatened them.

When Andrea presently mentioned Salvatore Gozzoli, he broke out into another great Swabian imprecation upon his old enemy; after that, he said nothing more until he had heard all there was to tell. Then, having decided upon the first measures to be taken, he asked of Maria Curletti, who was weeping distractedly.

“Does anyone, besides you and us here, know of Donna Fiordelisa’s absence?” And, when she answered no, that neither she nor her sister had as yet spoken to anyone since their discovery of Donna Fiordelisa’s absence, a few minutes earlier, at the usual hour for awakening her: “Then, let it be given out that she is unwell and will keep her room

for some days. Do you understand? And see to it that no one learns the truth from you. Now go back to Donna Fiordelisa's rooms as though nothing unusual had happened. And do not forget to fetch her meals for her from the kitchen—you can eat them yourselves."

As the twins went back, in obedience to his injunctions, Stürmli turned to the four men. All this time, Don Cesare had been standing thunderstruck, beside the Chaplain, wide-eyed with amazement at the news of his brother's flight with his wife and Gozzoli. At last a smile of slow-growing amusement stole into his face and he had to put up his hand to hide it at the thought of his father's defeat by Giacinto and Fiordelisa. In the meanwhile, Father Ogniben had put an arm round Don Bartolomeo and was speaking to him in rapid whispers.

"Is not this purely a matter for the authorities, rather than for any private action?" he was saying. "Nothing can be done without a warrant from the Cardinal Secretary empowering the most excellent Prince to arrest the runaways—nothing whatsoever."

But Stürmli, overhearing this, at once proclaimed his intention of proceeding with the matter as seemed best to him. He was not sure, in his own mind, whether someone among the inmates of the castle itself might not know more about the whole business

than he would be readily willing to admit. However, his decision was quickly taken.

“Pending the return of Prince Bordelacqua, I shall not allow anyone to leave the castle,” he said. “Until then, gentlemen, you will be pleased to consider yourselves as being, so to speak, my prisoners.”

With that he left them and went over to the gateway where a halberdier was standing on guard.

“No one is to go by you before I come back again,” he told him. “I shall be absent for some hours—until this evening it may be—but you will pass on the order to whoever relieves you as though it were from the Prince himself. If you have any trouble use the butt-end of your weapon—and if that be not enough, use the point, too.”

And, so saying, he returned to the group in the centre of the courtyard.

“I am going to ride out to meet the Prince in order to inform him of what has happened,” he announced; and without another word, went off in the direction of the stables, leaving the four to stare at each other in silence until Don Bartolomeo spoke at last.

“Sor Antonio is right—we can do nothing in Prince Bordelacqua’s absence,” he said. “And now—for I have not yet said my Mass—I think I will

go up to the Chapel. Can you wait half an hour, sir, in charity for an old man, before saying your own?" he asked of Father Ogniben.

"Very willingly," replied the Chaplain rather dazedly, as they began to move in the direction of the door into the building, whilst Don Cesare burst out laughing at their woe-begone expressions; he himself was not in the least put out any longer, for he guessed that his Balthazar was in the best of hands and felt sure that sooner or later he would see him again, safe and sound.

The family council held in Rome, as to Don Giacinto's fate for the time being, between his father and the Bishop of Anagni and the Abbess of Castel Gandolfo, had terminated in favour of the Prince's policy of keeping his son for the present under restriction in the Sabines.

It had not been easy for Prince Bordelacqua to induce Don Lorenzo and Donna Olimpia to forego their intention of petitioning the Pope for an inquiry into Giacinto's health, with a view to obtaining a final and definite pronouncement, either as to the annulling of his marriage and the reversion of the family honours and estates to his brother on the one hand, or, on the other, the rehabilitation of his power to inherit and his reunion with his wife. Only

after prolonged and acrimonious discussion had Giacinto's uncle and aunt been persuaded to let matters remain as they were for a little longer, until such a time as their elder brother could—as he had put it to them—feel perfectly certain of Giacinto's being able to do himself full justice under the searching examination of the papal experts, and so of insuring their favourable judgment in his behalf. Before this argument Don Lorenzo and his sister had, perforce, been obliged to give way at last, and the victory had fallen to Prince Bordelacqua, albeit not without an exchange of words between himself and the Abbess in which, had she but known it, Donna Olimpia had succeeded in thoroughly disquieting the family autocrat. For she had spoken of ultimately appealing, if necessary, to the Venetian government, through its representatives in Rome, for intervention in the matter; for Fiordelisa was a citizen of the Republic, so that her freedom from an insane husband was its very intimate concern.

However, he had finally managed to bring over Donna Olimpia, more or less, to his own view of the advisability of a further delay; and had left Rome for Acquanera secure in the consciousness that all was yet in his own hands could he but hit upon some means of prolonging the situation indefinitely until the tie between Fiordelisa and Giacinto should break by force of habit and

Giacinto's imprisonment become recognised as an unassailable institution of *Casa Bordelacqua* by the rest of the family.

The Prince had started unusually early that morning on his return journey from the city; so that he was nearly halfway between Tivoli and Tagliacozzo when, towards midday, Anton Stürmli drew up his horse beside the coach in a cloud of dust and threw up a hand in salute to the brim of his hat.

"How now?" demanded the other, leaning out. "What brings you in this fashion?"—and then, seeing the look on Stürmli's face as he dismounted, something prompted the Prince to add, "Open the door and I will speak with you apart."

Descending from the coach, he went away from it a little distance, beckoning his henchman to follow him; when they were out of earshot of the escort he turned and bade him say on.

"Is there anything amiss?" he asked impatiently.

"Most exalted Lord, it is this: that Don Giacinto Bordelacqua has fled and that Donna Fiordelisa has gone with him," replied Stürmli, "and that that carrion, Salvatore Gozzoli, has helped them to do so by breaking in like the thief that he is."

"Don Giacinto! Fled? And Donna Fiordelisa?" The Prince whispered the words almost weakly, as though he could scarcely pronounce them without anguish. After a brief pause he asked more

firmly: "When did this happen? And which way did they go?"

"It happened about the fifth hour of the night, and they must have gone by way of Avezzano, I think," said Stürmli. "That was one reason why I thought it best to ride out and meet your lordship here, whence, if it seems good to you, we may yet be able to intercept them by striking quickly northward toward Rieti and Spoleto. For it appears to me certain that they will make in that direction by the road through Avezzano. Indeed, if I may say so, it is the only chance of overtaking them."

For a moment, everything swam in front of Prince Bordelacqua's eyes; for him indeed the crisis was fraught with every imaginable peril, and the time in which to decide upon his course of action brief in the extreme. The question was no longer one of procedure along the lines of law, but, rather, along those of expediency, and of expediency alone. But, as he saw, there was sound sense in Stürmli's proposal of intercepting the runaways instead of attempting to follow them in the first instance. And whatever was done must be done quickly.

"I have money on me sufficient for some weeks," he thought rapidly; "pistols, too—I may expect to need those. And, as for a horse, well here are several to choose from. Come what may, Giacinto and Fiordelisa must be stopped and brought back, or

else——” but the thought of what might happen otherwise was too frightful to be borne. The whole fabric of his existence seemed to be tottering under the blow of this disaster that had so unexpectedly struck upon it. All that was any longer comprehensible to his mind was that he must save his name and that the silence of Giacinto concerning the buried past must be insured—and that of Fiordelisa, too, it might well be—at any price whatsoever. Beyond that he could think of nothing, either of right or wrong or the possibility of discovery in the event of his having to employ violence; or even of the chances of his being killed in the desperate undertaking in which he was about to engage.

“Tell them to go on to Acquanera,” he said to Stürmli, pointing to the coach and its escort of men-at-arms. “Say that I am called away upon an unforeseen matter of business. Pick me a horse and let us be gone.”

CHAPTER XIII

IT had taken rather longer than Gozzoli had quite expected for the fugitives to reach the neighbourhood of Rieti; as they neared the town by a bridle-path through the vineyards the day was already well advanced on its way and the sun was beating down hotly upon the old walls and the limestone heights beyond.

From his place in front, Gozzoli turned his horse's head and came back to Giacinto and Fiordelisa.

"I will go in there," he said, signifying the town with a nod of the head, "and will buy what is needed —some bread, a *scudo*'s worth of pistol balls and some powder; also a pair of boots for Don Giacinto. If you will wait for me here, I shall not be gone long. When I come back we will go and look for a farm where to eat and to feed and water the horses. After that we will all rest until noon and then ride on towards Spoleto, where we can stay for the night."

After Gozzoli had left them the lovers did not speak for some minutes, but waited until he was out of sight before doing so. To both Fiordelisa and Giacinto it seemed as though they would never be able to utter more than a fragment of all that was

in their hearts; it was hard for them to find any adequate form of words at all, and so they contented themselves, instead, with looking very long and earnestly at one another. Finally Giacinto let the reins fall on his horse's neck and, leaning over to Fiordelisa, put his arms about her and kissed her.

“My sweet friend—my sweet wife,” he whispered; and Fiordelisa did not say anything in reply but only suffered him to caress her, the while he continued to whisper his love against her cheek. Presently however, Giacinto ceased and sat upright to listen awhile intently, as though his ear had caught some distant disquieting sound.

“What is it, dear?” asked Fiordelisa. “Did you hear anything? But it is impossible that anyone could have followed so soon as yet to be close upon us.”

As he realised the truth of this, Giacinto laughed heartily at his own unfounded fears.

“No, of course not,” he said. “Still after what has just happened to me I could believe almost anything to be possible. Oh, Fiordelisa, to think that I am actually speaking to you—touching you—and that I am free—free, with the sun above me and a horse under me and weapons to my hand! To be sure, they are only pistols”—glancing down at the polished butts of a pair in the holsters of his saddle—“a brigand’s arms—but still they are better than

nothing. But what is it?" he asked in his turn, seeing that Fiordelisa had gone pale and had turned away her head. "Are you feeling ill, beloved?"

Ever since the sight of Teresinella in the church of Sant' Onofrio had so comforted and elated Fiordelisa by the assurance it had given her of Giacinto's sanity, she had come gradually to ignore altogether the accusation preferred against him by his father; that of having killed his mother in a fit of rage. Now, however, at his mention of weapons, the accusation had suddenly come back to her mind, assaulting it with an almost superhuman pertinacity and cunning. So totally unprepared did it find her withal that, strive as she would to throw it off, the dreadful thought held her fast, incapable of offering any resistance to it except that of her will. For all her efforts to liberate herself from its insidious domination, she could only sit there, dumb and terror-stricken in its grasp, whilst Giacinto stroked her face with his hands and entreated her to speak.

"What is it?" he was repeating frantically. "What is it, *carina*? Is it anything that I have done or said? Tell me—tell me——"

But she could only shake her head, afraid to look in his direction for horror of the spectre that stood between them. Mingled with this terror were self-loathing for having let herself be overtaken by it, and a feeling that, unless she could quickly get the

upper hand of the abominable suspicion, it would soon end by gaining complete possession of her.

Therefore she forced herself to look her husband in the face, that she might read there the refutation of what Prince Bordelacqua had told her about him; but Giacinto's expression conveyed nothing to her except his anxiety to know what was passing in her mind. And yet something in herself cried out upon her so angrily in that instant for her weakness in allowing the accursed suggestion—that perhaps his father might have been speaking the truth—to find even a momentary place in her imagination, that she felt inclined to confess her disloyal doubts of Giacinto to him, then and there, and to ask his forgiveness for them. But when he began again to kiss her face and to stroke her hands with his, Fiordelisa's resolution melted in the warmth of his caresses and she put the thought of it away from her in order to give herself up to the delight of Giacinto's love for her.

It seemed no more than a few minutes before Gozoli came back to them, a pair of serviceable jack-boots slung over the front of his saddle.

"I think your lordship will find them comfortable," he said, lifting them off as he came to the ground. "When you have put them on we will go to a house of which I have learned near here, where they will let us put up the horses until the middle of

the day and where Donna Fiordelisa and yourself can get some sleep. But we must start again at noon so as to reach Spoleto by easy stages; for the horses must be saved as much as possible, since I do not know anything yet of the enemy's movements—speaking with respect."

When Giacinto had donned the boots, Gozzoli buckled a pair of new spurs on to them, and, remounting his horse, led the way between the white mulberry trees on which the vines are still trained in the northern parts of Sabina, to the house of which he had spoken. This was so much like the one from which Giacinto had escaped that he almost shivered as he looked at it; low and white, it stood rather away from the vineyard itself and beside the high-road, on to which its door opened hospitably.

"We shall be safe here," whispered Gozzoli to Giacinto as he dismounted. "Only, remember Don Giacinto *mio*—!" putting a finger to his lips to signify the need of caution in speaking. "By your leave I would suggest," he added, "that you should pass under another name; as travellers, say between Naples and Venice—it would be safer so."

"Well thought of, Gozzoli! Then let it be plain Signor—what shall we say?—Signor Gandara of Venice and his wife"—smiling at Fiordelisa. "Yes, that will do capitally."

They were received by a countrywoman who ex-

plained that she was the wife of the proprietor of the vineyard, and that her husband, the vintage being over, was absent on a visit to his brothers near Sienna.

"All the same," she assured Gozzoli, "I and my daughter will make your gentry as comfortable as princes. And the horses shall be well looked after too. Never fear—we understand them better than most. A feed of beans and maize and a bucket of water with the chill taken off it."

Afterwards, when they had all three had some food to break their fast, and Fiordelisa had gone to lie down for a few hours on her hostess' bed—a model of exquisite cleanliness, as is almost invariably the bed in an Italian household, even of the poorest—while Giacinto had fallen asleep in his chair at the table, Gozzoli strolled out by himself into the sunshine, the better to think out his plans in the open air.

He was undecided whether it were best after all to continue the journey by way of Spoleto; or else, to go instead through Orvieto and Chiusi towards the frontier separating the Pope's dominions from those of the Grand Duke of Tuscany. If he were to follow the latter course it might possibly add to the difficulty of the pursuers by compelling them to obtain the sanction of the Tuscan government before they could arrest the runaways; on the other hand, he re-

flected, the road through Spoleto to Perugia offered on the whole the more favourable chance of out-witting the hunters by reason of its hills and the dense woods that lined it along much of its length.

“It is not speed that will help us so much as skill,” he told himself, as he stood there, surveying the view. “Skill and—determination. For I am very much mistaken if we are going to shake them off without a fight. And, let me say it honestly, I would much rather avoid a fight than court one under the circumstances—since it is plain that if any harm should come to those two children, Prince Borde-lacqua would inherit Donna Fiordelisa’s patrimony as her next of kin.” Here he stroked his chin dubiously. “And what, then, would become of Teresinella and Salvatore? No, we must take no chances—there is no work here for a sword, but only for firearms. And, of the two, the Spoleto country is certainly better suited to the use of those.”

He did not go indoors again, but made himself comfortable, with his back against the wall of the house and well in the shade where he could snatch a nap and yet be on the lookout for anyone who might be coming along the road; for he was a light sleeper and his ears were trained to arouse him upon the least suspicious sound. Also, he had the soldier’s habit of being able to awake at will at any given time; so that towards mid-day he opened his eyes

once more, shook himself and went off to where the three horses were tethered in the ox-stables at the back of the house. Having saddled the animals, he took the pistols out of his own holsters and Giacinto's and carefully examined the priming. This done, he replaced them and led out the grey barb into the road in front of the building; seeing the hostess standing in the door, he called to her to notify the others that it was time to resume their journey.

Presently, when they were ready to move off, he drew from his pocket a small parcel and handed it to Fiordelisa, who, upon unwrapping the paper about it, found it was a little velvet riding mask.

“I forgot to give it to you before, Lady,” Gozzoli explained, “Please forgive my forgetfulness. My wife said that you would find the mask useful as a protection against the sun and dust and so I hope you will consent to wear it.”

“Indeed I will, Sor Salvatore, and thank you—and Teresinella too,” she answered, fitting the soft covering to her face and tying the strings of it behind her head, while Gozzoli held her horse for her. When she had fastened the mask in place, she picked up the reins once more and the three set off along the highway, towards Spoleto, the woman of the farm watching them until they were out of sight.

In the meantime Gozzoli was giving the two young people the account of how he had managed to reach

Acquanera in the very hour of the vintage festivities, and so at the only time when it was possible for him to succeed in carrying out his difficult mission of rescuing Giacinto and simultaneously of reuniting him in his flight with Fiordelisa. Gozzoli had calculated everything to a nicety but, even so, he had been obliged to wait almost a week at Avezzano before all the circumstances at Acquanera were ripe for the carrying out of his enterprise, during which time he had actually—albeit in vain—visited the castle itself by night in the hopes of establishing communication with Fiordelisa. In fact, he had failed on two occasions to fall in with her and had only succeeded in doing so at the third attempt. Had she not chanced to have been out of doors on the night of the vintage, he had intended to have given it up and to have devoted his whole energies, instead, to securing Giacinto's escape—“But,” as he now assured her with a smile, “we would both soon have been back together to fetch you home, Lady—if we had had to pull the castle down in order to get at you.”

In confirmation of which Giacinto nodded, although he did not say anything, but only stared out over his horse's ears at the long white road in front of him.

Slowly the afternoon drew on, no longer quivering with heat as had been those of a month earlier,

but cool and with an intensely blue, hard sky, in the clear atmosphere of which far-distant objects looked to be almost within actual reach of the beholder; until about three o'clock, when, as the woman of the house by the wayside was feeding her fowls in front of it, she became aware of the thud of horses' feet upon the road, and looked up to see a couple of riders drawing near. One of them was slightly in advance of the other, and the woman put them down at once in her own mind as being master and man. They were dusty, and had evidently ridden far and hard to judge from the condition of their powerful coal-black horses, whose chests were all spattered and flecked with lather.

As the foremost of the newcomers came within speaking distance, he beckoned imperiously to the woman to approach; whereat she obeyed, recognising him for one who was accustomed thus to beckon those of whom it might please him to have speech. When she had drawn near he stared hard at her, as though to see whether or not she were going to tell the truth; and the woman quailed before his look, because she had a brother whom she loved and who was a brigand, and because there was something very cruel and commanding about this elderly man in black on the travel-stained black horse; moreover, the other and younger man, although he looked even more evil-tempered than this one, and was dressed

as a horse-soldier of some sort, yet manifested in his demeanour toward the first a certain unmistakable deference that frightened her more than anything else.

“Have you seen anyone pass this way today?” demanded the elder of the two in a voice at once strikingly refined and harsh with a kind of sadness in it. “Two men and a young lady on horseback? One of them was riding a roan-coloured horse——”

“May it please you, sir, I—yes—that is——” she began to falter when he broke in with appalling violence upon her hesitation.

“Will you speak? Or”—striking his horse with the wand that he carried so that it reared upon its hind legs and towered above the terrified woman before coming to earth again, trembling and snorting within a foot of her.

“Speak—and speak quickly,” commanded the rider. And then with an indescribably splendid weariness: “For I am Bordelacqua.”

Thereat she spoke as he had commanded her, quickly, albeit scarcely above her breath, for she knew by repute the man in whose presence she stood:

“Most excellent Lord Prince,” she said, “yes, I have seen the persons pass by of whom you speak. There were three of them—a lady and her husband and a friend. The lady was riding just such a roan horse as you mention. They stopped here this

morning and went away at noon to the northward—I think they are making for Venice. Their name—I remember it distinctly—was *Gandara*."

For nearly a minute, Prince Bordelacqua sat quite still without moving so much as a muscle of his face. Then he raised his wand—without turning in the saddle—as a signal for Anton Stürmli to come up to him.

"We are on the right track," he said, when Stürmli had complied with the unspoken order. "They have been here and have gone away again towards the north. You were right, I see, in thinking that they would make for Spoleto. What is to be done next?"

Stürmli bethought him before answering. The horses had already done a hard day's work, in view of their soft condition, while those of the fugitives had probably had a long rest and had gone on again, refreshed and with a three hours' start into the bargain to favour them. By now, they might well have brought their riders to Terni, almost halfway between Spoleto and Rieti; and by nightfall they would probably be in Spoleto itself. Also, there was no way by which their movements could be intercepted, since the only road to Spoleto was the one they had taken and which lay along the base of the hills. Also, again, they would spend the night or, at any rate, the first part of it, in all likelihood, at Spoleto;

therefore, argued Stürmli, if Prince Bordelacqua rested here at Rieti for a few hours and then resumed the pursuit, he would reach Spoleto while the others were still asleep, and so they would almost certainly fall into his hands—even if they succeeded in escaping him, it would be only by so narrow a margin as merely to defer their speedy capture.

“*Signor Principe*, my advice is this,” he said and went on to lay his plan before his master. “Thus, your Highness will surely overtake them before long,” he concluded. “Or, it may even be that you will be able to get in front of them, and turn them back towards Rome; which would make their surrender absolutely unavoidable.”

Of which counsel the Prince could not help but see the wisdom; and so he dismounted and went into the house while Stürmli took the horses to the stable.

The only thing that Stürmli had overlooked in his calculation was that the gates of Spoleto, as the capital of a Papal province and a garrison town and the seat of government of a Papal delegate, would be shut between sundown and sunrise. This contingency had been overlooked also by Gozzoli; and so it came about that, when at last he was riding out of the town a little distance—for prudence’ sake—in advance of Fiordelisa and Giacinto early the next day, he pulled up suddenly and peered ahead of him into the

morning mists that blanketed the winding way from Spoleto down the rolling country below. He had repeatedly gone over in his mind during the night every possible course of action of those who must by that time be already in pursuit, and had come to the conclusion that only by getting away speedily from Spoleto would he be able to outdistance them once they should have started directly northward from the neighbourhood of Acquanera. As it was, he could not help fearing they must be already close upon him, thanks to the several additional hours he had been forced to remain shut up in Spoleto. They would not, of course, have been able to make absolutely sure that he and the young couple had remained in the town, although they would have found out in all probability, through inquiries, that he had passed that way with Donna Fiordelisa and her husband late on the previous afternoon. So there was nothing for it but to keep his eyes open and to have both spurs and pistols in readiness for either a long, stern gallop or an actual encounter. And now it seemed to him that certain, faint, ill-omened sounds had fallen on his ear; the clink and tinkle of horses' bits in the road where it fell away towards the village of San Giacomo in Poseta.

Now when a man hears that particular sound unaccompanied by any ringing of horses' hoofs, upon a fine morning of October in Umbria, he can only sup-

pose either that some riders are passing over grass, or else that they are sitting still upon their horses and that their horses are not moving at all except to toss their heads. This being so, Gozzoli's distrust was at once on the alert, and he turned to impart his views to Giacinto who was by now close enough for him to speak to.

“There is someone below there,” he whispered. “It may be one of those who are out after us. If so, we shall have to do one of two things. Either we must ride over them,—you and I in front and Donna Fiordelisa behind us—we shall have the advantage in coming down upon them from above—or else we must turn backward, go through the town and out the other way through the mountains towards Cerreto and Visso. But that would be a pity, if we could help it; so what do you say, my Don Giacinto—shall we chance it and go on, instead?” For he had momentarily forgotten his more cautious mood of the previous day and was spoiling for a fight. Moreover, a successful encounter might go far towards permanently weakening their opponents. But Giacinto demurred, urging their ignorance of the numbers of those who might be lying in wait for them; as well as the presence of Fiordelisa, whose safety must be their first consideration.

“No,” he said, “I will not consent to expose her to the chances of violence. But if you will wait here

for me I will try to find out how many persons we have to reckon with."

It was now Gozzoli's turn to demur; he begged that he might be allowed to go himself, but Giacinto would listen to no remonstrances, and slipped down from his horse, throwing the bridle to Gozzoli. He walked on, a pistol in his hand, a little distance, until the others had lost sight of him in the mist.

When he came back to them again he was very pale but smiling; he did not speak, though, until he had come quite close.

"There are only two of them," he said—"my father and Anton Stürmli. They did not see me, but I think they are expecting us to come out of the town by this gate."

What had happened was that, on finding the gates closed to them in the night, Prince Bordelacqua and his captain of halberdiers had held a council of war, so to speak, and had decided to enter the town in the morning in order to seek their quarry there; or, that failing, to appeal to the Papal delegate for a warrant empowering the Prince to arrest Giacinto and Fiordelisa as runaway minors, and Gozzoli for horse-stealing; and to claim that clerical dignitary's assistance as such in carrying out his own warrant. So they had spent the time until dawn in the house of a peasant-vintner just outside the walls—uncomfort-

ably enough, to be sure—and had then risen and mounted their horses to ride into the town. At the last moment, however, hearing the faint tramp of horses coming out of the gates in front of them, they had ceased their advance in order to see who it might be who was approaching thus cautiously. And now, as the silence continued on the road above them, the suspicions of both became almost a certainty. Prince Bordelacqua had even drawn a pistol and was craning forward eagerly over his horse's shoulder, the better to see what might be coming towards him, when the stillness was broken by a sudden bellowing and the clatter of hoofs and the cries of a throng of human beings under the sway of excitement or fear.

And then, as suddenly, there came tearing down the road a gigantic white ox, its head lowered in an attempt to defend itself against the onslaught of three or four dogs that were leaping up at it as it ran. One instant, the huge form loomed spectral and hazy in the fog as it bore down upon the two horsemen; and the next, before they could draw aside from its path, it had crashed in between them, flinging man and horse to right and left, so that they stumbled and fell and rolled in the dust.

There followed a rush of people, some of them on foot and others on horseback, laughing, swearing and shouting, a veritable pandemonium of frenzied

humanity, which roared like a whirlwind past where the prostrate riders and their horses lay scattered on both sides of the road.

For, just as Giacinto was telling Gozzoli that he had seen his father and Stürmli waiting in the mist, the thing that was to solve the difficult question for the fugitives, of whether to go forwards or backwards, came to pass.

As they were about to confer once more upon this new and disconcerting development of their situation, there had arisen from behind them the tumult incidental to the escape of some large animal from the control of those in charge of it; looking around, they had seen the ox and its attendant crowd of men and dogs charging in their direction; and Gozzoli's decision had been instantly taken. There was not a moment to lose; seizing the bridle of Fiordelisa's horse, he forced the animal back out of the way of the danger that threatened it, calling at the same time to Giacinto to look out for himself. "Thank Heaven—here is our chance of getting past them!" he cried. "I am going to join in the chase—keep as close to me as you can and remember that we are riding for our lives!"

Before the words were out of his mouth the ox had thundered past, and Gozzoli, with Fiordelisa

and Giacinto, was swept into the current of the pursuit. Giacinto, slightly in front of the others, saw the desperate, hunted creature fling the two mounted figures aside from its path as though they had been dummies of straw and lath.

All he could see of them in a flash of time was a kicking, struggling horse on either side of the road, the riders being veiled from sight by the dust that hung like smoke on the fog; and then, above the roaring at his heels, he heard Gozzoli's voice shouting to him :

“ To the right—to the right! ”

At the bottom of the descent from Spoleto where the road wound past the foot of the hill, Giacinto contrived to obey this injunction and turned his horse away to the northward; although in so doing he came near to being overturned by the onward rush of those behind him who now redoubled their efforts to prevent the maddened ox from making good its escape. However, he found himself no longer one of the multitude but only an onlooker, Fiordelisa and Gozzoli beside him, panting and rather dishevelled, at the now rapidly diminishing stream of horses, men and boys, as it tore down into the open country.

But Gozzoli was not minded to let anything retard the ride that lay before them.

“ Come,” he urged Giacinto, “ you and Donna Fiordelisa must go in front now, while I ride behind

to keep them off us. There is no turn in the road for some way. So, forward—gallop——”

Away they went over the road towards Terni, the autumn coolness of the morning turned to actual cold by the speed at which they raced through it; so that the eyes of both Fiordelisa and her husband were soon wet with unwilling tears which, from time to time, they brushed away as well as they could for the necessity of holding in their horses. And Gozzoli, as he came along behind them, kept on throwing glances over his shoulder to see if there were anyone in sight.

At last, after they had ridden thus some six or seven miles, he called out to Giacinto to go more slowly; and presently told him to stop.

“We have slipped through their fingers this time,” he observed, bringing his horse to a halt. “But I could not tell if they were either of them hurt or not. Did you notice anything at all, Don Giacinto?”

“No, I could see nothing, after the blessed ox had tumbled them over, except the legs of their horses,” returned Giacinto. “*Mehercule*, though! but I never saw anything more beautiful than the way in which——”

At that moment there was carried to their ears a light drumming of hoofs behind them; and at once they drew among the dense thickets that bordered the way and from the shelter of which they could

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command a full view of the road itself. But all that presently came into sight was a young peasant astride a mule, that carried, beside its rider, a sack of flour upon the crupper of the saddle; as he went by, the fellow broke into a snatch of song and waved his hat gaily at the half-hidden forms that were watching him.

They were not destined, indeed, to set eyes again upon either Prince Bordelacqua or Stürmlì for some time to come.

CHAPTER XIV.

FIVE days later the weather changed, and with it the season, from summer to autumn.

The gusty afternoon was reddening to its close as Giacinto, who had been riding in advance of Fiordelisa and Gozzoli, drew rein upon the edge of a belt of mulberry trees in the duchy of Mantua and took in the prospect before him.

All around was silence; overhead the northeastern sky was heavy with the reflection of the sunset and the first oncreeping of night; behind Giacinto lay the straggling orchard of mulberry trees, and before him was a narrow expanse of marshy land—now long since become productive rice-fields—on the far side of which stretched a long belt of aspens, their stems gleaming white and ghostly in the evening light. Beyond these, again, and some miles in rear of them, he could just make out the dim bulk of a citadel looming dark against the sky through the uncertain distance; and, further still yet, the white line of some mountains that he took to be the Alps. Another twenty-four hours, and he and Fiordelisa would at last be safe in her castle of Treviglano upon territory of the Venetian Republic. Of their

pursuers they had neither seen nor heard anything since their delivery from them by the ox at Spoleto. Ever since then the three had gone on their way unmolested, riding without undue haste through Umbria into Tuscany and from Tuscany into Emilia, threading the Apennines by way of Pistoja and Vignola ; and so past Modena and Gonzaga to the river Po, which they had crossed by Borgo Forte on the afternoon of this the sixth day of their journey, and a Saturday.

As Giacinto sat there in his travel-stained clothes on his brother's blue roan, he thought of the farmhouse in the Sabines, and breathed a word of gratitude for his recovered freedom.

“Thanks be to Heaven,” he muttered, “that I can say to myself, ‘I will go here or there, or where I please.’ *Domine Dio*”—raising his hat reverentially—“I thank Thee for my liberty. If I have sometimes spoken foolish things in my anger, is it not Thine to forgive ? ”

When he had thus made acknowledgment, a great peace came over him and he remained so for a while with his hat in his hand and a smile on his face that was now all browned with the sun. And then, as he surveyed the foreground of the quiet landscape, something moved swiftly out and across the face of it,—a hunted stag, followed close by three or four couple of liver-coloured hounds that

coursed mutely over the sedgy ground below the aspens.

At the sight, all Giacinto's new-found joy of life seemed to gather in him to a climax—the chase, the evening stillness and his own young lust of action suddenly united to intoxicate him, and even appeared to have communicated their infection to the generous roan. In spite of all that he had been called upon to do during the past week, Balthazar's fiery temper sprang like the spark of flint on steel to fuse with that of his rider at sight of the desperate stag and its relentless foes. One mighty bound which all but unseated Giacinto, and then they were off at a stretching gallop, which was only checked to some extent by the heavy nature of the ground itself, for there are very few horses with quite the same invincible heart and courage and powers of endurance as those of Balthazar's colour!

But Giacinto was no longer the only person on the scene; the first few couple of hounds had been quickly followed by others, and these by a man on a skewbald horse with its tail close docked and its ears cropped in the French and English fashion. The man wore a long shoulder-wig beneath his "palmer" hat, of which the brim was turned up in front, and carried a French hunting-horn slung on a baldric over his left shoulder; as he galloped he waved frantically to Giacinto to hold his horse in hand so

as not to turn the deer back among the trees. At the same time, Giacinto heard Gozzoli's voice calling to him, from far behind, to come back, but he was too entranced by the prospect of seeing the hounds run into their game to pay heed to any such remonstrances, and only obeyed the imperious signals of the stranger on the skewbald, pulling back Balthazar to the level of the unknown whose face he now at last saw clearly. The face, still handsome, its expression of restless discontent and the deep lines of dissipation that marked it notwithstanding, was that of a man in middle life; as their courses converged he cast a quick look of questioning on Giacinto, as though in expectation or surprise; then he shrugged his shoulders, ever so slightly, and struck his horse with the spurs, so that it redoubled its pace, throwing up a shower of earth-clods as it went.

The noise of yet other horses behind him now made Giacinto glance back—to see ten or twelve riders coming out from among the trees and following in his tracks and those of the man with the horn; one in particular, seeing him look round, gesticulated with his hand and called out something that Giacinto did not catch. Turning to watch the hounds, he saw them racing alongside the stag and leaping up at its quarters, but only to fall back again, baffled by the energy with which it tore on over the swampy ground. It was plain, though,

that the hunted creature's forces were almost exhausted, as with lolling tongue and heaving flank, it struggled on in a last effort to save itself.

All at once it stumbled and fell, and the chase was at an end, the hounds flinging themselves upon their prey in a tide of lithe brown bodies and a snapping of red, open mouths and flashing teeth. Once, and yet again, they were scattered and thrown back, bleeding and yelping, as the stag came to its feet and stood at bay, slashing and stabbing at its enemies with its lowered antlers and razor-edged forefeet.

As Giacinto gazed, fascinated by the sight in spite of his natural compassion for the central figure of it, the man on the skewbald, seeing that he carried pistols, pointed to them, crying to him to shoot:

“Quick with one of those—before we have every hound ripped up! There goes another of them—oh, curse it!”—as the stag with one swift sweep of an antler threw back another adversary, torn and dying, to fall heavily, almost under the skewbald's feet. Before Giacinto could do as he had been asked, however, the speaker had thrown himself off his horse and had come over to him, and had snatched the pistol from the nearest holster. Cocking it, he levelled the weapon and pulled the trigger—and through the smoke Giacinto saw the stag pitch forward upon knees and nose, then roll over and lie still while the hounds tore and bit at the unresisting

carcass. They were whipped off at once, however, by one of the bystanders—a servant of some kind, as Giacinto took him to be by the livery he wore, albeit in so thinking Giacinto was wrong, because it was not a livery at all but the undress uniform of an adjutant of the Duke of Mantua. Thereupon the other, he with the French horn about his body, began to play a call on it, while the person in the uniform beckoned to a fellow and told him to fall to on the dead stag with his knife.

As the man, after taking off his coat and rolling up his sleeves, came up to where the stag lay, he bowed very low to him who had the horn, and then, kneeling down by the carcass, he drew out a hunting knife from its sheath on his hip and proceeded to his work of disembowelling the creature. At that moment the man with the horn ceased his playing and strode over to where Giacinto sat watching the scene on Balthazar.

“ You are a stranger hereabouts, sir, I imagine,” said the unknown. “ May I ask your name? ”

“ I am the——” Giacinto was beginning to reply smartly, for there was something almost insolent in the manner of the question; but remembering the demands of the moment, he changed his mind. “ My name, sir, is Gandara,” he said, “ Signor Gandara of Venice. I am travelling from Naples with my wife,” pointing to where Fiordelisa and Gozzoli had drawn

up in the distance and were waiting for him to rejoin them.

Thereupon to Giacinto's amazement, his interlocutor turned to the man in the uniform, saying with a smile:

“ My dear Vendramin, will you be so good as to present Signor Gandara to me? ”

Thus requested, the other drew near from among the riders, all of whom had dismounted and were whispering among themselves a few yards away, near where the hounds were being coupled up by the huntsman. He was a pleasant looking young man, this Vendramin, with blue Gothic eyes and the carriage of a soldier.

“ If you will descend from your horse, sir, I think it will be easier,” he told Giacinto; seeing that the latter hesitated, he added, a degree testily: “ Come, come, sir—I must really ask it of you.” And then, when Giacinto had somewhat unwillingly complied, he turned to the man with the horn. “ Your Highness, I have the honour of presenting to you the Signor Gandara,” he said, and to Giacinto, “ I have the honour of presenting you to his Highness, the Duke of Mantua.”

Charles of Gonzaga, fourth Duke of that name, held out his hand to Giacinto, who at once inclined over it and raised it to his lips.

“ I must apologise for intruding myself upon your

Highness' sport," he began. "The truth is, I was carried away, to begin with, by my horse's enthusiasm and so——"

"There is nothing to apologise for, Signor Gandara," returned the lord of Mantua. "You understood my signals and so no harm was done—or I might have lost my stag, if you had headed him back through the trees. I have him safe enough now"—glancing with a smile at the man who had finished cleaning out the carcass and was wiping his knife and his hands with tusocks of lush-grass. By this time the murmuring of the hounds against the restraint to which they had been subjected during that process had increased to such a volume that it was all but impossible for Giacinto to hear the Duke's words. While he waited for Charles IV to continue with whatever he might have to say, the latter turned once more to Vendramin with a motion of the hand to signify that the dead stag should be taken to a place of safety and the hounds be then let loose to devour the entrails. As the carcass was being hauled away to be fastened for removal upon a hurdle of branches, the Duke and his followers, including Giacinto, withdrew a little to one side, leaving their horses; and then the hounds were uncoupled.

Truth to tell, the ravenous din of them as they hurled themselves upon their repulsive banquet, the smell of blood and the unaccustomed excitement of

it all, rather overcame Giacinto's strength of endurance and, for a minute, he felt faint and unwell, so that he had to turn away his head and stumbled a little. He was recalled to himself by Duke Charles in person, who, seeing his predicament, laid a hand good-naturedly on his shoulder.

"Admit it, Signor Gandara, you are untrained to such a spectacle," he said. "I thought so," as Giacinto nodded an admission of this indictment. "Then shall we ride on together, a short way? Let me confess it frankly—I am consumed with curiosity to learn how things are going in the South. So I shall take it as a kindness if you will enlighten my ignorance as we go."

"I will do my best to satisfy your Highness," answered Giacinto with what small show of assurance he could contrive. But he was really beginning to feel intensely uneasy as to how he was to keep up the appearance of what he had represented himself to be; for he had, naturally, no more information to impart of recent events in southern Italy than had Balthazar. However, when the Duke had been helped by Vendramin to remount, Giacinto followed suit and, remembering to place himself on the other's left hand, rode off beside him towards where Fiordelisa and Gozzoli were still waiting for the truant.

"The times are unsettled," remarked the Duke

parenthetically. "Is there anything, do you believe, in all their talk of the King of Spain's intention of sending re-enforcements to Naples?"

"There is talk of it, yes," Giacinto assented, with an air of deprecating incredulity. "At least, some people declare that it is so; whilst others, again, are equally ready to swear that it is not. Speaking for myself, now—well, I do not fancy there can be much truth in such rumours. Both the olive-harvest and the vintage have been unusually good this year; and, as your Highness knows, when that happens there is little fear of any popular unrest."

"True, very true. Were you in Naples during the King's recent visit? They tell me he was well received on all hands. Did he impress you favourably?"

Luckily for Giacinto, whose powers of invention were being rapidly exhausted, his companion's attention was drawn from him at that moment by seeing Fiordelisa begin to move in their direction.

Womanlike, as she saw her husband and the stranger detach themselves from the small knot of men over by the aspens, Fiordelisa had instantly divined the danger of Giacinto's being led into making some slip of the tongue by which he might, all unintentionally, betray the secret of his identity and of her own; for, although they were now comparatively near the Venetian boundary and scarcely a day's

journey from Fiordelisa's own domain of Treviglano, yet they would not be safe until they had actually crossed the frontier into the Veneto. Therefore, she now came forward to interpose herself between Giacinto and the distinguished looking stranger with whom he was riding. Moreover, Gozzoli—who, although he did not know Duke Charles by sight, yet felt the strongest apprehension at what he saw—had whispered to Fiordelisa :

“ Separate them, Lady, I entreat you very earnestly—let nothing make us lose an hour. Remember, there are still many miles between us and safety.”

So as they drew near, she advanced to meet them, speaking gently but pointedly to Giacinto.

“ My dear, you have kept me waiting,” she said. “ We must be moving on, for it will soon be evening. And so, if this gentleman will excuse us——”

“ Pray, present me,” murmured the Duke at this juncture, to Giacinto. For, notwithstanding that the lady was wearing her mask, he could see quite enough of her face to tell him that she was a rarely beautiful young woman. Also, her voice was what he himself afterwards described as “*flûtée*” to his patron, Louis XIV of France, on the occasion of his visit to that great man, a year later.

“ With the greatest happiness, sir,” answered Giacinto. And to Fiordelisa : “ I must beg of you to take down your mask, *carina*, because I wish to pre-

sent you to His Highness the Duke of Mantua," with a brief pause to give her time to lower the mask from her face to below her chin. "Your Highness," he concluded, "I have the honour of presenting to you my wife, the Signora Gandara."

Fiordelisa, for all her vexation at the delay to their journey, bent respectfully to her new acquaintance, who, on his side, raised his hat in the manner of his exemplar, the King of France, and bowed his tribute to her loveliness.

"Charmed!" he declared softly. "Charmed, and very much at your service. By the way," he added, "seeing that, as Signora Gandara gives me to understand, you are travellers, may I hope you will not take it amiss if I venture to offer you both such poor hospitality as is at my disposal? If you will pass a night and perhaps a day, too, with me—for your horses must need some rest—I shall esteem myself happy."

The position had suddenly become, as Fiordelisa saw, difficult and delicate in the extreme. If the invitation were declined, there was no telling in quite what light this petty sovereign might choose to regard a refusal of it; he might even go to the length of placing every sort of obstacle in the way of their further progress; indeed, it was quite within his power to detain them for inquiries to be made concerning them. The times, too, were lawless to the

last degree, thanks to the prolonged warfare raging more or less intermittently in the neighbouring lands of Lombardy and Piedmont and even in the far western confines of the Duke of Mantua's own possessions, the duchy of Monferrato.

At all hazards, as Fiordelisa realised, he must not be offended. Giacinto was already beginning to stammer an excuse for hurrying on their way when she interrupted him.

“ My husband is as anxious as I am to reach our home as soon as possible,” she explained, “ but, if we may take advantage of your Highness’ kindness, we shall both be very grateful for the opportunity of resting ourselves and our horses. Only, as we are travelling without baggage, we must necessarily present but a poor appearance, and so we trust you will make every allowance for us.”

“ Dear lady, you would be positively dazzling in any costume, however simple! ” was Duke Charles’ laughing retort. “ From the bottom of my heart I thank you and Signor Gandara for consenting to be my guests even for a few hours. And, now, how does it seem to you—shall we ride on towards my house? ” as he styled his hunting-palace beneath the walls of Mantua.

From his earliest youth up, Charles IV of the House of Gonzaga had been what is known as a man of pleasure. He it was who, as a boy, thirty

years earlier, had sought to obtain money with which to pay for his dissipations by selling Monferrato with the fortress of Pinerolo to Louis XIV—the consummation of which bargain had only been frustrated by the treachery of the luckless wretch destined to become famous as the “Man in the Iron Mask.” Since those early days the character of Charles of Gonzaga could not be said to have altered beyond recognition; the unbridled boy in him had merely given place to the more staid, though equally pleasure-loving man. And rarely in all his wide experience of beautiful women had he chanced upon one fairer and more desirable than this brown-eyed *Signora* Gandara, the encounter with whom had come as a delightful refreshment to him in the midst of the political storm that was now raging over his head, between his patron of Versailles and that patron’s antagonists, the Emperor of Germany and his covert ally the Duke of Savoy. Duke Charles himself had not yet been able to make up his mind for which side to declare, and his position was in consequence anything but an enviable one, being as it were “between the devil and the deep sea.”

And so they rode on through the gathering dusk across the country towards the town of Mantua, the Duke between Fiordelisa and Giacinto, with Goz-

zoli a short distance behind them; while, further yet in rear, the others of Duke Charles' guests brought up the tail of the procession, with many an exchange of sly jests as to his new discovery—as they had already dubbed Fiordelisa among themselves.

It fell naturally to Fiordelisa to make reply to the Duke's questions relative to the condition of affairs in the South. This she managed to do creditably enough, and at length the talk turned upon the subject of herself and her husband, and their connection with Venetia, of the radiant capital of which their host spoke with an affection not altogether unmixed with regret; for there, as he was gracious enough to explain, his own happiest days had been passed—although he abstained from entering into details. When Fiordelisa confessed that she had never yet had occasion to set foot there, he turned in his saddle and regarded her with unfeigned amazement and pity.

“What?” he exclaimed. “You, a Venetian, have never seen Venice? You are still a stranger to her charms? It almost passes belief—if I may be permitted the liberty of saying so! Well, well, you have much to look forward to, Signora, in that case—far more than I can attempt to describe. Let us only hope that you will soon add fresh lustre, by your presence, to the splendour of the Queen of the Adriatic. Dear me! I could wish to exchange places

with you when you first make her acquaintance," he concluded whimsically.

Giacinto, who was careful to join in the talk only whenever a stray remark seemed to be particularly addressed to him, was inwardly cursing his own thoughtless impulse which had drawn upon Fiordelisa and himself the unwelcome hospitality of this ruler, of whose unstable character he had sometimes heard Don Bartolomeo make mention; for the affair of Monferrato in 1672 had aroused considerable interest throughout Italy in the degenerate descendant of the House of Gonzaga. He could only hope that the morrow, at latest, might see them well out of Duke Charles' company and that, by the next night-fall, they might be safe at Trevigliano. The prospect of their being detained at Mantua, perhaps, until Prince Bordelacqua (supposing him to be still in pursuit) should come up with them, was anything but a pleasant one to Giacinto, stimulating him to thoughts of flight—by stealth, if need be—from the Duke of Mantua's velvet-gloved talons.

As for Salvatore Gozzoli, who knew the world and knew also only too well the infamous reputation of the Duke of Mantua for profligacy, if there had not been all those others there to see the thing, besides Fiordelisa and Giacinto, he would have drawn a pistol and would have shot the man like a mad dog. As it was, he could only rack his brain for a

means of delivering his charges from the danger that threatened them—the double danger of the Duke's evident captivation by Fierdelisa and of his detaining her husband and herself here in Mantua until Prince Bordelacqua should succeed in overtaking them—an event which, for Gozzoli himself, would probably terminate very badly. When he thought, too, of how close they had been to their journey's end and of how little it would have taken to land them securely within the sheltering confines of the Veneto, Gozzoli could have sworn aloud in his rage and disappointment!

As the riders came nearer to the city the waning light played softly upon the battlemented walls and upon the gleaming marshlands below them, in whose leaden-coloured patches of stagnant water they were here and there reflected. A low wind, however, was beginning to rise, ruffling the water at intervals so that the reflections were broken and scattered now and again, and causing the leaves of the plane-trees planted along the road leading in from the country across the swamps to rustle mournfully. Duke Charles, however, instead of entering the town turned aside and drew rein before the gates of a large, handsome building a few hundred yards distant from the walls. This was the Palazzo del Té, a country house of the Renaissance period built upon the site of an ancient stud-farm of the Gonzagas by

Duke Frederick II; here it was the pleasure of his descendant to entertain a few chosen boon-companions from time to time during the hunting season.

This he explained to Fiordelisa now, as the gates were being opened to them by the porter, adding with one of his inscrutable smiles: "So that, if you will take the part of hostess for this evening, dear lady, I shall be infinitely honoured. It will be to confer a great happiness not only upon me but upon my friends as well—whom I will forthwith present to you."

"It is rather my husband and myself who are honoured by your Highness," answered Fiordelisa. "We are both extremely sensible of it."

They had now reached the steps before the doors of the building, which stood open, revealing a glimpse of the entrance-hall softly lit by two thick tapers of yellow wax impaled upon massive bases of silver like those upon the altar of a church. These stood on either side of a stone pedestal supporting a bronze bust of the King of France, Louis XIV. Some five or six servant-men grouped about the open doors came forward as Duke Charles halted his horse and let fall the reins on its back.

"Have rooms prepared at once for the Signora Gandara and the Signore her husband," he told the senior of the menservants, the house-steward, a stout man with the face and manner of a church dignitary,

who was holding the skewbald horse's head. Then, slipping down quickly to the ground, the Duke stepped to beside Fiordelisa. "If I may be allowed the privilege?" he said, making ready to assist her in descending.

For an instant she appeared to be unsure of how to act—whether to avail herself of his proffered help or not; but, seeing a look of surprise begin to creep into his face, she hesitated no longer.

"I am less light, I fear, than your Highness gives me credit for being," she said laughingly, as she drew her foot from the stirrup and leaned over to place her hand on his shoulder; for the process of dismounting was then by no means so easy an one for a lady as it is now. Giacinto's eyes—he had been slower by some seconds than his host—flashed ominously, as he watched Fiordelisa trust herself to Duke Charles' arms; but he controlled his temper manfully and forced himself to smile, understanding from a swift glance that his wife cast on him over the other man's shoulder that she implored him not to resent anything she might find necessary to do or say for the sake of their mutual safety. For her woman's wit had gauged the dangers of Duke Charles' hospitality from the moment of their first meeting—and there was very little in all the world that she would not have given gladly to save Giacinto and herself from any further extension of it. In

imagination she could already hear Prince Borde-lacqua's voice raised to claim his prey from this Galli-cised Gonzaga, who was offering her his arm to lead her up the steps into his house. She was still wondering if she could find some suitable pretext for continuing the journey that same night, after supper, when he drew her gently into the candlelight of the entrance-hall and then, releasing her arm, stood there beside her in front of a little fireplace in which some olive logs were burning brightly, waiting for his friends to join him in order that he might present them to Fiordelisa. The servants in the meantime had taken possession both of her grey barb and of Balthazar and had handed them over, together with Gozzoli and his brown horse, to the care of the grooms who had come running from the stables to take charge of them. Gozzoli had gone off without a word into the twilight with the stablemen; but Giacinto had followed Duke Charles and Fiordelisa into the painted anteroom where he took his stand near them, between the fireplace and the doors that were open to the cool October dusk; whilst two of the serving-men (who had remained to await the arrival of their master's guests after their fellow-servants had withdrawn upon the Duke's entrance) stood outside upon the steps, impassive as statues. Except for the Duke's low tones talking to Fiordelisa of bygone Venetian carnivals—of which she knew next

to nothing, and so could only respond with an occasional monosyllable to his rhapsodies—and the falling of the fire, no sound was audible for a few minutes until that of distant talk and laughter and of horses' feet upon the road outside the gates began to come in out of the evening to the perplexed and anxious ears of Giacinto and his wife.

Almost at once the little throng of horsemen came in sight and began to crowd into the narrow space between the gates and the house; here they dismounted and the grooms came again and took away the horses; and the riders began to ascend to the steps by twos and threes into the anteroom. Here, as they arrived, they stopped for a moment on the threshold and bowed to their host, who then called each one of them up to him by name and introduced him to Fiordelisa and Giacinto; whereupon the conversation became general.

The last of all the Duke's guests to enter from the courtyard was a very dark, middle-sized man who, on being summoned to advance, came forward with a smooth, quick smile and a supple bending of his back, more in the manner of a servant than a friend.

"Signora, and you, sir," said the Duke to Fiordelisa and Giacinto, "this is my Minister of Police, Baron Marcaria. Dear Marcaria," to the baron, "let me make you known to Signora Gandara and the Signore, her husband, who are breaking their

journey with me. They are of Venice, you know, and are travelling from Naples."

"I am more than honoured," returned Marcaria. "Your servant, madam, and yours, sir,"—bowing deep, his hand on his heart and one leg thrust out stiffly in front of him with the toe pointed ceremoniously. Then, as he straightened himself once more and looked up, his glance encountered that of Gia-cinto, who gave a quick sob and turned deathly white beneath his tan; for in spite of the years that had passed since their last meeting the two men had recognised each other.

C H A P T E R X V.

THE rooms in the Palazzo del Té were comparatively few in number; so that it was not possible for the steward to allot more than one of them to Fiordelisa and Giacinto. It was a fairly large room and looked northward and to the city; but now the curtains were drawn over the windows and the room itself was full of soft, golden light from candles set in brass sconces on the walls. The walls were hung with tapestries representing hunting scenes, and between the windows at the further end of the room was a dressing table elaborately set with toilet objects of silver; whilst in an alcove on one side there stood a great carved bed of some very dark, polished wood, that shone like black ice beneath a night sky. As the steward ushered Fiordelisa into the room he whispered to her that it was that set apart for the use of the Duchess on the rare occasions of her favouring the place with her presence for a few hours; adding as he withdrew, that he trusted the Signora would find everything to her liking, and that the Duke would receive his guests once more in the painted “salone” downstairs in about half an hour preliminary to supper.

When they were alone together Fiordelisa turned to Giacinto with a torrent of explanations.

"I could not help it—indeed, there was nothing else to be done but to accept this man's hospitality," she said, speaking very fast and low. "If we had refused, he might have taken offence and have had us detained upon some pretext or other, whether we liked it or not. After all, it is only for one night—since, come what may, I am resolved not to stay here beyond to-morrow morning. But how are we to go on pretending to be strangers to De Curtis—Baron Marcaria, as he calls himself, and he to us? And how shall we get away without his good will? He has only to tell the Duke that we are not what we have represented ourselves to be—and we should be prisoners instead of guests. There would be inquiries—the Nuncio would be informed of the whole affair and it would end by our being delivered up to Prince Bordelacqua. No, no—let us rather tell the whole truth to De Curtis and ask him to befriend us. I cannot imagine why you should think of doing anything else."

"I cannot ask anything of De Curtis," rejoined Giacinto. "I will not even speak to him. Please do not ask me why, *carina*—because I can never tell you. Let it be enough to say that he once did me a certain injury and that, if ever I get the chance, I mean to kill him for it—and that he knows it. I am not un-

forgiving as a rule, but—well, I do not think he expects either to be forgiven or to be recognised by me."

With which Fiordelisa had to appear satisfied, although she retained her own conviction as to the need of enlisting the good will of De Curtis on the side of her husband and herself during the next few hours. Otherwise, their situation might become an appalling one between Prince Bordelacqua on the one hand and Duke Charles on the other; for her first instinctively distrustful antipathy for the latter had been increased rather than diminished by their subsequent conversation. This was indeed just such a person as Donna Olimpia had so often warned her against in the convent days at Castel Gandolfo—selfish, superficial and unscrupulous. And, as she surveyed herself in the mirror on the dressing-table, Fiordelisa, thinking thus, coloured hotly with sudden anger at the underlying insult of his hospitality. But, truly, she was more scared, even, than angered, by this aspect of her predicament. At all costs, De Curtis' beneficence would first have to be secured before she could hope to withdraw herself and Giacinto from the gilded snare into which his impulsiveness had led them. And so reasoning, she set to tidying her hair and her dress for the next meeting with Duke Charles and his perplexing Minister of Police.

As she did so, the first thrill of shyness she had experienced since the escape from Acquanera passed over her, on realising that she was alone with her husband; for, hitherto, they had occupied separate rooms at the various inns along the way, Fiordelisa in one and Giacinto in another with Gozzoli, both men being fully dressed and having their weapons beside them, so as to be ready at all times for any emergency. Thus, the present moment was one, so to speak, of mental transition, for Fiordelisa and for Giacinto too, although they both were thinking almost more of how to get safely from the Duke of Mantua's hospitality than of the new life together with its countless exquisite intimacies. And then, suddenly, the realisation of the stupendous truth struck them simultaneously like a mighty wind, making them both tremble a little; and Giacinto came close to his lovely young wife and drew her to him so that her face was against the red lips of him. Despite the difficulties of the journey he had managed to have himself shaved fairly regular by one village barber and another, so that his cheek still felt smooth to the touch of Fiordelisa. For the time being, he had forgotten all about the Minister of Police.

"You and I, darling—you and I! Can it be really true?" he whispered. "Or is it all nothing but some beautiful dream?"

"No, no—it is all quite real and true," returned

Fiordelisa. "Only we must think of some other things first before we let this wonderful happiness which is ours make us forgetful of what is going on around us, Giacinto," she pursued earnestly. "Do not let us blind ourselves to the danger that is lying in wait for us. We are in a bad house, the house of a man who is not good; and so we must go out from it as soon as we can. I do not know anything about the Duke, but I feel sure that I am right in what I say—that he is not a good man and that he does not really mean well towards us in his heart. Therefore I am going to ask you to let me do whatever seems best to me in order to make it possible for us to escape from him."

Even so, she had not found courage to put her innermost thoughts and apprehensions concerning Duke Charles into words; nevertheless, some inkling of them seemed to have penetrated Giacinto's understanding, for he flushed hotly and his thick eyebrows met together in a quick scowl.

"Do you mean that you think he has—disloyal—intentions towards us—towards you?" he asked; and when Fiordelisa did not speak but only turned her face away to hide it on his shoulder, he broke out with an oath, declaring he would not pass another minute beneath that accursed roof. "Let us begone instantly!" he cried, heedless now of all who might hear him. "Put on your cloak again and come down

with me to the stables—and let who will dare to interfere with us"—and he made as though to open the door.

But Fiordelisa, who saw clearly the perilous un-wisdom of such a course, caught Giacinto's arm and held him back.

"Ah, let us do nothing rash," she entreated. "At this moment, a single false move may be our ruin. Remember that we are in the absolute power of a man subject to no other law than that of his own caprice and pleasure. And so we must be careful to please him until we can slip through his fingers. Do you follow me, dear?"

"Well, yes, I suppose I do, *carina*," Giacinto conceded reluctantly. "So be it, then; we will do as you think best—and I will promise not to slap Charles of Gonzaga's face until I come back again from Trevigliano to do it. But I feel as if it would choke me to eat his bread in the meantime—and as to De Curtis—"

"Now, I am going to take command, seeing that you have promised to be guided by me," said Fiordelisa with sudden decision, "and, that being so, Giacinto, I have this to say: you will serve me and help me best by accepting the hospitality which has been forced upon us as though it gave you nothing but the utmost pleasure to do so. And, moreover, if I speak with De Curtis—even if I take him apart at

some time during the evening—you must not betray me by showing displeasure or ill temper. Can I count upon you?"

For a second Giacinto's face darkened again at the thought of Fiordelisa's possible propinquity to the man whom he felt himself bound in honour to kill, sooner or later, as the cause of his poor, pretty mother's dishonour.

"Must you do this thing?" he asked. "Must you speak with De Curtis, Fiordelisa?"

"Yes, I must," she replied firmly, "because, without his help, I do not think we shall get away easily from here. So do not let yourself be surprised into anger by anything you may see me do or hear me say to-night."

Before long, having made what scanty toilet was possible under the circumstances, they went down to rejoin the company that was waiting in the "salone" for the Duke to make his appearance. Here Fiordelisa was accosted by Count Vendramin, who informed her that the Duke requested the honour of taking her in to supper himself. There were about a dozen men present, including Giacinto, who, mindful of his pledge to Fiordelisa, began at once to mingle with the others as they talked together in low tones before the door through which Duke Charles would presently issue forth to join them. They were all men of more or less the same type as Charles him-

self, to judge from their elaborate costumes and the something more than a hint of the manners of older Versailles in their speech. The only one of them who stood rather apart from the rest was Baron Marcaria, who was leaning with an elbow upon the mantelpiece, watching the little throng half amusedly. He made no effort, apparently, to dissimulate his utter indifference to the good opinion of any member of it, and when he saw Giacinto set himself to make friends with it, the faint smile that wreathed Marcaria's lips neither lessened nor widened by so much as the fraction of an inch. Nor did he attempt to avoid Giacinto's glance, but on the contrary, met it with an easy good humour that made the younger man turn away in the fear of compromising himself by some unguarded show of the abhorrence that filled him for the former "*cavaliere servente*" and every memory connected with the man. And yet, somehow, Giacinto felt that De Curtis was as unwilling as himself for their previous acquaintance to be made known, or even suspected, by any appearance of recognition between them. Indeed, in the moment of that recognition there had passed from one to the other, as it were, a thrill of mutual hatred; to each the encounter had come as an intolerable surprise, and to De Curtis, at least, the most personally embarrassing that could well have occurred. Yet the urgent necessity for concealment had enabled the

impulsive youth, as well as the supple courtier, to surmount the shock of the moment, and none of the onlookers could have detected the slightest sign to indicate that the two men had met before.

It was not until later in the evening, when supper had come to an end and Duke Charles had led the way back from the dining-room to the main "salone," that Fiordelisa found the opportunity she desired of speaking with De Curtis. Both she and Giacinto had explained again as best they could the fact of their travelling thus without baggage or even a change of clothes, and their host had laughingly accepted their apologies, saying that he himself had more than once travelled in a hurry and so could sympathise with them. All through the meal he had never ceased from plying Fiordelisa with compliments upon herself, with anecdotes relative to his own prowess as a squire of dames in Venice and Padua and with extracts from his own verses indited in honour of their charms. On returning to the "salone," however, he invited Fiordelisa to say in what way she would prefer to pass the evening, whether with music or some other form of entertainment, to which she answered by suggesting that they should play games, a proposal received with plaudits of approval on all sides.

And so it presently came about that Fiordelisa contrived to get word to De Curtis as they were together and apart from the others for a few seconds in a corner of the long drawing-room, in the course of "blindman's-buff"—the "blindman" being Duke Charles himself.

"When can I speak to you alone?" whispered Fiordelisa, behind her hand, averting her eyes from Giacinto, who was watching her from the opposite wall against which he was leaning with Vendramin, the while Duke Charles groped among the furniture for someone upon whom to lay his hands. The plan of the game, it need hardly be said, was that the "blindman" should capture and identify one of the other players, and that, if he succeeded in doing so, he might do as he liked with his prisoner, condemning him either to take his place as "blindman" or to any other form of forfeit instead by way of ransom. Needless, likewise, to add, that Duke Charles' hope was thus to procure himself an opportunity of imprisoning the exquisite brown-eyed Signora Gandara, whose beauty had put the torch to his susceptible nature.

"When can I speak to you alone?" repeated Fiordelisa, judging from the fact of De Curtis' continuing to stare straight in front of him that he could not have caught her words. To her surprise, how-

ever, he answered, and that without turning his head in her direction :

“ Excuse me,—I was thinking how best to arrange it.” And after a moment’s pause, he continued : “ There is only one way; and that is for me to meet you somewhere later on. Let me see—yes, I will come to your room in two hours’ time. Please remind your husband therefore, of the need for speaking as quietly as possible—although, after all, it is not I who have anything to fear here in Mantua.”

Scarcely had he spoken, though, when the door of the “ salone ” was opened and there entered one of the serving-men; bowing to the blindfolded figure of Charles IV, he crossed the floor on tip-toe to where Giacinto stood beside Vendramin and said something to the former, who thereupon excused himself to Vendramin and left the room, followed by the serving-man.

A considerable time elapsed—during which the game of “ blindman’s-buff ” went on amid a good deal of hilarity as the Duke, in his all too evident attempt to capture Signora Gandara, only succeeded in capturing one after another of the men, to set them at liberty again with a word of laughing dissatisfaction—before Giacinto came back. To Fiordelisa’s consternation, she saw that his face was all hard and drawn and lined as by some devastating emotion, either of horror or pity or anger; or, perhaps, of all

three welded in one. Whatever it might be, she noticed that he did not speak to anyone during the rest of the evening unless he were obliged to do so, and that, when the time came for the Duke to go to bed, Giacinto did not make even a pretence of bowing to him as he left the "salone" for his own apartments.

When he had gone, leaving his guests to their own devices, Giacinto went over to Fiordelisa and took her by the hand.

"Come away from this," he said, "I have something to tell you. Pray excuse us, gentlemen"—to the group of smiling courtiers—"but we have ridden far these last days and are quite worn out with fatigue."

And, so saying, he drew Fiordelisa with him to the stairs where the same serving-man who had called Giacinto away, and who was on duty there for the time being, lighted a candle and carried it before them up into their room, after which he left them again at once.

When they were alone, Giacinto turned to his wife with an almost inarticulate cry of rage and grief.

"The beasts!" he broke out, "I would like to have them all broken on the wheel—they and their Judas—Duke! Oh, *carina*, what will you say after I tell you what has happened? When I tell you that

—that they have poisoned one of the horses—your dear little grey barb that carried you so bravely all these days? Oh, yes, it is quite true. And I know why they have done it—to keep us from leaving this horrible place! You are right when you said that this Duke of theirs was a villain and a traitor! May he burn forever—a thousand curses on him and on the souls of all his best dead!"

"Hush—oh, hush, dear, please," implored Fiordelisa, laying a hand upon his arm. "Tell me about it quietly, and we will see what is to be done."

She would not let him perceive how sickeningly surprised and grieved she was by the death of the animal that she had come to love nearly as much as though it had been a human being; but continued with a calmness that somehow made Giacinto feel almost ashamed of his own want of self-control.

"How did it happen? Have you seen Gozzoli about it?"

Then Giacinto sat down beside Fiordelisa on the edge of the great bed, and told her how he had received a message to say that Gozzoli wished to speak with him; and how, on going out, he had found Gozzoli waiting for him in the entrance-hall with a tale of having gone to give a last look to the horses before going, himself, to bed, and of having found the little barb lying stiff in the stall, though as yet scarcely cold; and of how Gozzoli was convinced

that it had died of poison by reason of certain infallible signs about the mouth and eyes as well as of the unnatural rigidity of the carcass.

“He said he would spend the night there in the stable to make sure the other two horses were not poisoned too,” Giacinto pursued. “Unfortunately, though, we have not money enough with us to buy another animal just now, so that we cannot all three finish our journey together unless Gozzoli can manage to borrow one. But, if these devils have poisoned the grey, it is hardly likely that they will lend us something to take his place.”

Fiordelisa did not answer at once. Presently she said:

“I ought to tell you that Signor De Curtis is coming here to have a little talk with me——”

“*De Curtis—coming here?* What do you mean, *carina*? ”

“He is coming here, later on,” replied Fiordelisa. “He told me to warn you of his coming. For my sake, Giacinto, do not take it amiss—it was I who asked him for a chance of speaking with him in private. And we cannot do without his help. Of that I feel sure—more particularly now that, as we are morally certain, his Duke means to detain us in Mantua. So will you not try to feel as little unkindly towards him as you can while he is here, dear? ”

Later, when there came a gentle tapping on the door, Fiordelisa left Giacinto sitting on the side of the bed and, going to the door, opened it to admit Agostino De Curtis.

He came in swiftly and noiselessly; and still without speaking, walked to the middle of the room where were a sofa and some chairs; here he paused, waiting as it were for an invitation before seating himself. All this while, Giacinto did not move from the bed; neither did he utter any sound, nor so much as let his glance stray in the direction of the Minister of Police. Seeing his attitude, De Curtis turned towards Fiordelisa with a melancholy smile, as she came back from closing and bolting the door.

“I am at your service, *signora*,” he said in a whisper, placing a finger to his lips in order to remind her of the necessity for caution. To which Fiordelisa nodded comprehensively.

“Will you not be seated?” she invited him. And when he had done so, she pursued, sitting opposite to him on the sofa:

“Signor De Curtis, before anything else, I wish to thank you for giving me this opportunity of enlisting your friendship on my husband’s behalf and my own——”

“It has always been yours and Don Giacinto’s,” interpolated the other, adding enigmatically: “Even upon occasions when it may, perhaps, have been least

expected." But, although it seemed to Fiordelisa that he addressed these words rather to Giacinto than to herself, yet De Curtis in speaking them did not either raise his voice or turn his head towards the bed. And so she went on:

"I have received my husband's leave to take you into our confidence. As you must have gathered from the fact of our travelling under an assumed name, we are afraid of something."

"Precisely—yes, the possibility of such a thing had occurred to me, I confess."

"We are afraid of being overtaken by Prince Bordelacqua," said Fiordelisa. "I tell you this because I hope you will be a friend to us, and help us to escape him and to reach our home at Trevigliano without being further molested by anyone. I tell you, too, because I do not believe you had any hand in the poisoning of my horse by the Duke's orders, this evening. Am I right in believing so?"

"As Heaven sees me, this is the first I have heard of it! Your horse has been poisoned, do you say, and by an order of his Highness? But what object could he have had in——"

"As to the Duke, I will leave you to form your own conclusion. Before I say any more, though, have I your promise to befriend us, my husband and myself, against my father-in-law?"

"Against Prince Bordelacqua? Oh, indeed, that

you most certainly have!"—De Curtis could not help the slight tinge of something vengeful that crept into his voice as he pledged himself.

"And, if the need arise—against others as well?"

"I am afraid I do not quite understand you. But, if you mean the Duke"—and then, after a brief silence during which Fiordelisa did not take her eyes off his face—"of course I will befriend you, Signora, in any way I can; although I really think you are mistaken in entertaining any doubts of his Highness' loyalty."

"I accept your promise with a very grateful heart, sir," said Fiordelisa. "Our situation, then, is this: Don Giacinto and I are fleeing from his father who has kept Don Giacinto a prisoner for the last four years near Acquanera—that is to say, ever since about the time when you left the service of Prince Bordelacqua."

"May I ask what was the charge or pretext on which Don Giacinto was thus confined?" inquired De Curtis.

Thereat a sudden terror seized on Fiordelisa's soul by reason of her utter inability to answer this question in the presence of Giacinto, before whom it was naturally impossible for her to speak of his own alleged insanity. And further, in regard to the accusation of matricide preferred against her husband by his father, Fiordelisa remembered the oath of

secrecy concerning it that Prince Bordelacqua had extorted from her at the time of their first interview after her return to Rome from Castel Gandolfo. Clearly then, there was nothing that she could say on the subject of the Prince's grounds for imprisoning his son.

"I do not feel myself quite at liberty to enter into that at present," she returned, glancing at De Curtis supplicatingly, so that he understood she had some terribly strong reason for her reticence and nodded his comprehension of her difficulty.

"As you were saying, you have cause to fear that Prince Bordelacqua may attempt to deprive Don Giacinto of his liberty a second time," he murmured quickly. "When do you think the Prince is likely to reach Mantua?"

"He may be here now," said Fiordelisa, "for all that I can tell to the contrary. He is alone, except for one of his men-at-arms who rides with him. We think it may be——"

But De Curtis had risen and was already moving towards the door.

"Promise me that you will keep faith with us—that you will keep the secret of our name and will help us to reach Trevigliano in safety"—Fiordelisa implored as she rose likewise, and went with him to the door, while Giacinto from his place on the bed watched them in sullen silence.

Such had been his struggle to curb his hatred and to keep from throwing himself upon De Curtis and killing him, that the nails of Giacinto's clenched hands had dug deep into the palms and the hands themselves had become cramped and rigid and utterly without any feeling in them.

“ I can honestly promise you this,” said De Curtis in reply to Fiordelisa’s entreaty—“ that the secret of your real names shall go no further, if I can prevent, than the Duke in person at the uttermost. And I will help you as well as I can to get safely to Treviglano. But I have really next to no power at all.”

And with that he was gone, leaving Fiordelisa to soothe Giacinto’s fury as best she could; as he went down through the empty, dimly lit palace towards Duke Charles’ quarters, the Minister of Police muttered two or three times to himself the words—“ *In sanctorum Communionem*”—though what his belief in the Communion of Saints had to do with the case only Agostino De Curtis could tell.

CHAPTER XVI

THE fall with his horse at Spoleto notwithstanding, Prince Bordelacqua had been in no way incapacitated from speedily resuming the pursuit of his son and daughter-in-law. Half a day's delay in Spoleto for the purpose of having a dislocated wrist set in place by a barber, and for obtaining the warrant necessary to the arrest of the runaways from the authorities, was about the whole sum of his loss through the encounter with the ox. Stürmli, too, had escaped practically unhurt, save for a number of bruises and a severe shaking; and, of the horses, that ridden by the Prince had alone received a cut on the shoulder from the point of a horn, whilst the other bore not even so much as a trace of its overthrow. Towards midday therefore, after having satisfied himself that he was on the right track, Bordelacqua had taken the road again with redoubled energy in spite of his aching right wrist in its sling.

But, push as he would, the distance between himself and the fugitives seemed to be lengthening rather than otherwise as he followed on their trail up through the Papal States and into Tuscany; more than once, when he had fancied himself within an hour or so of them, he had been forced to waste un-

counted precious moments by the accident of a lost horseshoe or of a wrong turn in the road. However, by dint of ruthless perseverance, he succeeded in maintaining touch with their traces; until, at last, having dogged those traces all the way from Spoleto into the northern duchies, he found himself, one murky, drizzly dawn, sitting upon his horse within less than a mile of the city of Mantua.

By this time he was thoroughly nervous and depressed by the possibility of being already, perhaps, too late to prevent Fiordelisa and Giacinto from passing over on to Venetian ground, whence, as he knew well, it would be almost out of the question for him to hope to drag them back to his own power. Once there, they might easily defy him by laying their case before the Senate at Venice; which body would most certainly do all in its great power to uphold Fiordelisa's claim to be allowed to live in peace with her own husband upon her own estates. And, as certainly, would the Roman government be inclined to agree with the Venetian, seeing that it had no physical means of doing otherwise, and that it would infallibly refuse to make use of any spiritual weapons in so extremely doubtful a cause as that of Don Ferdinando Bordelacqua. No; as the Prince had seen clearly from the outset, his only chance was to take the law into his own hands—Giacinto must either be brought back a prisoner to Acquanera or

else his silence as to the buried past must be secured, effectually and forever, in any way that circumstances might dictate. As to Fiordelisa, well, if need were, she also would have to be silenced once for all.

While Prince Bordelacqua was still lost in thought he became aware of a couple of men on horseback, who were watching him from beneath the scanty shelter of a plane-tree by the roadside, a few hundred yards nearer the town. As it seemed to him, these men had some doubts as to what he himself might be doing there; for they appeared to be debating together concerning him—judging, at least, from the way in which they alternately leaned forward to peer in his direction, and then put their heads close together as though in consultation. Presently, however, they appeared to have come to a decision to interrogate him, for they began to ride forward leisurely in his direction; seeing which, Prince Bordelacqua awaited them with a face of stone. It would be some minutes before they could reach him, he reflected, so that he had yet that much time in which to arrange his plans in case he should be called upon to give some account of himself as a stranger in these parts. He had not concealed his name from anyone, hitherto, but his real business had remained his own secret ever since leaving the Papal States, beyond the boundaries of which the warrant obtained from the delegate at Spoleto could have little

or no value. And so, when the two strangers, as they drew near, saluted him and politely inquired his name and business, saying that they were police agents appointed to patrol the roads on that side of the town, he replied:

“I have nothing to conceal from you, gentlemen, I am Prince Bordelacqua, a subject of the Holy Father, and am on my way from Rome to visit my property at Treviglano in the Veneto. Can you tell me if the road there from Mantua is safe for travellers?”

“Your Excellency may travel anywhere with perfect safety upon a pass issued either by the Minister of Police or by the Legate,” answered the other, a short, thick-set man dressed, as was also his comrade, in the uniform of a private of gendarmes. “But without one, you might have difficulties with the soldiers at Legnago. Therefore, if you will favour us by coming with us to the Ministry of Police——” he did not complete the sentence, but only smiled and began to turn his horse in invitation to Bordelacqua to pass on in advance of himself and his companion.

There was, it struck the Prince, a flavour of preparedness about the man’s whole behaviour that impressed him almost unpleasantly—as if he had come upon some hidden snare, and as if the two gendarmes had been expecting him exactly where and when they had found him. Only for an instant did he waver,

undecided; after which he looked back over his shoulder to where Stürmli was waiting, a little way behind, and beckoned to him to follow; and then, with a request to the two gendarmes to lead the way, he rode on after them in silence towards Mantua.

Soon they entered the still slumbering town—it was yet barely five o'clock—and rode up through its deserted streets, where the daylight was just beginning to make pale the upper part of the houses, until they came to the street in which stood—and still stands to this day—the house of the architect Giulio Romano. This they passed; but stopped almost immediately at an ancient building ornamented with gigantic hermæ on the opposite side of the way; the Palace of Justice, this, and the work of that same Romano and a very forbidding place, as Bordelacqua saw it in the dawn and the thin rain.

Here the gendarmes halted, one of them dismounting from his horse and throwing the reins to his comrade; then, turning to the Prince, he asked that he would follow his example and accompany him into the Ministry.

“But whom shall I find here to do business with me at this hour of the morning?” demurred Bordelacqua irritably, “for there is nothing in which a mere police sergeant can be of any use to me.”

“Pardon me, Signore,” replied the man with an inscrutable smile, “but it is his Excellency the Minister of Police, Baron Marcaria, whom you will find ready to receive you if you will be so good as to follow me.” Pointing up to a window whence a thin line of candle-light peeped out between the edges of a pair of curtains, he added: “That is his Excellency’s study, where he is even now waiting for you.”

“Waiting for me? Do you mean that he is *expecting* me?” cried the other, all his suspicions instantly on the alert. “Does he already know, then, that I am in the neighbourhood? And, if so, how did he learn of it?”

“His Excellency knows everything that happens within the duchy,” was the answer, in a tone of professional admiration for his chief’s abilities. “Nothing ever escapes him—no, never!”

As Prince Bordelacqua now came down out of the saddle, his mind was working with feverish rapidity. If, indeed, this Mantuan official, this Marcaria, had any precise knowledge of his coming, it could only be through information derived from one of the three fugitives; in which case, it stood to reason that one or all of them had passed that way (as he had already gathered from others along the road) and it might even be that they were at this moment under detention by the authorities of Mantua. If so, were those same authorities disposed to act in a spirit of

friendship towards himself, and to surrender the guilty parties to him? he wondered. Or would he find them prejudiced against him, perhaps by some unfilial accusation on the part of Giacinto, whose tongue might well have been loosened by the fear of falling a second time into his father's power? Such were the questions which raced through Prince Bordelacqua's brain as he followed his guide into the building, the great hall of which was slowly filling with the daylight.

Mounting the stairs, they went a few yards along the corridor until they reached a door upon which the police agent knocked deprecatingly.

"Enter," returned a voice; whereupon he opened the door and stood aside for Prince Bordelacqua to pass in. His name having been announced, the door was closed again and the Prince found himself in a fair-sized room illumined by a single candle set in a brass holder upon a table in the centre, at which a man sat writing in a high-backed chair. The man's head was bent over his work so that Bordelacqua could see only the top of his wig and a part of the chair behind it, which was upholstered with red velvet.

As the footfalls died away in the stone-flagged passage outside, the man said, "Pray be seated, *Signor Principe*," and raised his head slowly from the document upon which he had been so assiduously

engaged. "Dear me—surely we have met before. Is it not so?" he asked, leaning back in the chair, his chin supported by one hand that completely concealed his mouth, although an unmistakably malign humour twinkled in his eyes and sounded in the drawl with which he spoke. And then, as the Prince only stared at him in horror, without answering, he suddenly snatched up the candle and held it close beside his own face, from before which he had let fall his other hand. "Look at me and say—do you recognise an old friend?" he asked. "I see that you do," as the other drew a quick breath and came a step nearer. "And that reminds me—I would draw your attention to the fact of this,"—slipping his fingers round the butt of a pistol among the papers on the table. "It is loaded—and I can assure you that no one in Mantua will ask any questions of me if you oblige me to smash your head with a bullet."

There they stood, facing one another across the writing-table, until the Prince tottered slightly beneath the apoplectic rage mingled with consternation produced by this recognition. Seeing his sudden weakness, the Baron pushed his own chair forward for him.

"Sit down," he said, "and try to calm yourself. And remember this"—signifying the pistol in his hand.

Bordelacqua, however, chose to remain standing.

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lair. For the present, at any rate, it might be wise to abstain from crushing it prematurely by the statement of what he himself had seen of Princess Bordelacqua's death.

"Please understand once for all," he said, "that, by speaking to me in that way, you run the risk of being very severely punished. I have only to ring my bell here in order to have you taken to the *carceri* and beaten to a pulp. But I prefer to treat you generously. And now, sit down," pointing impatiently to the chair of which Prince Bordelacqua had not yet availed himself. "I wish to talk with you, and it irritates me to see you standing."

Never before had anyone spoken thus to Prince Bordelacqua; and the effect of it was such that his face, which had been previously grey with travel and fasting, now turned dark red as from a stroke of apoplexy. He could not even articulate at first, and stood there, glaring at the Baron, a hand thrown up to his neck as though to loosen his cravat in the effort to save himself from strangling.

Presently, however, as he slowly realised the strength of his enemy's position and the weakness of his own, he controlled himself by an almost super-human effort of the will. His wounded pride must, as he had no choice but to see, wait awhile until, given due fortitude and resourcefulness, he might

be in a position to wreak to the full his vengeance upon the destroyer of his life's happiness.

"Go on," he answered thickly at last, sinking exhausted as he did so, into the chair designated by the Baron. "Say what you have to say, and be quick about it; I have no time to waste on you."

Baron Marcaria smiled and passed a hand once more over his mouth, to hide the smile; to hear Bordelacqua speak in that way was really rather quaint.

"I will be as quick as I can," he said, walking over to the window, with the pistol still in his hand. Having drawn the curtains to let in the daylight, he came back to the middle of the room, blew out the candle and seated himself on the edge of the table.

"When I left your house," he began, "I had nowhere to go; I was without either money or friends or even a change of linen. That night I slept inside a confessional in the Church of Sant' Onofrio. The next morning I sold everything I had on me and bought myself a plain suit of clothes with part of the proceeds. What was left over I kept carefully by me. From Rome I walked to Florence, where I found employment with the police—as a prison clerk," he added simply, seeing the sneer on Bordelacqua's lips. "In that capacity I was enabled to place the Duke of Mantua under an obligation to me which his Highness discharged by taking me into

his own service. That was three years ago; since when I have been constantly overwhelmed by the favours of my master—until the other day when he sent me from Venice my patent as Baron of Marcaria and at the same time appointed me his Minister of Police. During the past two years his Highness has lived more in Venice than in Mantua, where the Duchess has administered the government in his name.

“I need hardly say that I do not offer you these details of information out of any regard for yourself but only in order that you may fully understand your own position at this moment—and that you may realise the folly of saying such things as that you have no time to waste on me. Your time is not your own any longer, because it belongs to me until I allow you to be your own master again. That, however, must depend largely upon yourself. Really now, I must ask you to be good enough not to interrupt me,”—as the Prince half rose to his feet at the words and manner of Agostino De Curtis di Cortatone, now by favour of his disreputable sovereign, Baron of Marcaria.

“The Duchess herself is one of the noblest of women,” resumed the latter after a brief pause—“a true Gonzaga of Guastalla; but, to be frank with you, no house yet built was ever large enough for them both, for her and the Duke, at the same time.

So that, after all, perhaps it is better that they should live apart. But two establishments cost more than one to maintain, more particularly such an establishment as is that of his Highness in Venice. Briefly, then, it amounts to this: that he is just now much pressed for want of funds and a large sum of ready money is quite indispensable to him. Her Highness, the Duchess, and myself were in despair of how to—well—of how to find cash sufficient to persuade the Duke to return to his palace in Venice, whence he came back here only three days ago in order to replenish his purse. Ever since then we have kept him amused with a hunting-party at the palace beyond the walls; he had not been easy, though, to manage, until last night when your eldest son and Donna Fiordelisa Bordelacqua——”

“ Ah—so that was how you knew of my coming, was it? Where are they now? Are they still here? I have a Papal warrant on me for their arrest——”

The Baron put the subject aside with a wave of the hand.

“ One moment, if you please,” he requested. “ As I was saying, then, Don Giacinto Bordelacqua and his wife made the Duke’s acquaintance yesterday by the roadside so to speak, and are now his guests at the Palazzo del Té. They are passing as Venetians under the name of Gandara. No one except myself has any idea that it is not their own name. The

Duke has taken a great liking to them—especially to Donna Fiordelisa. And so you have a warrant for their arrest, did you say? Upon what charge? I ask because it is just possible that I may see my way to doing business with you in the matter. Mind you, I promise nothing, but—" and he broke off suggestively.

Despite the affront to his dignity, the Prince compelled himself to draw the warrant from his pocket and to read it aloud from beginning to end. When he had finished he returned the paper to his pocket.

"Are you satisfied?" he demanded.

"Oh, perfectly—perfectly."

For a while the Baron kept silence, his gaze fixed thoughtfully upon the man over whom Chance had at last given him absolute power—this astounding combination of pride and guilt and servile eagerness. This, then, was the accusation on the ground of which Ferdinando Bordelacqua had kept his own son a prisoner for years—matricide and insanity. Small wonder that Donna Fiordelisa refused to name it in her husband's hearing. The Baron could not help wondering, moreover, whether it might not be just within the bounds of possibility that Don Giacinto himself were at least partially ignorant of the terrific indictment under which he laboured? As likely as not, he fancied.

He had no intention whatsoever of foregoing the

smallest particle of his revenge upon the murderer of the one human being that he, Agostino De Curtis, had ever loved; but that revenge would be incomplete without the preliminary administration of as strong a dose of false hopes as his patient and victim could be persuaded to swallow.

Presently, he continued, as smoothly as ever:

“Oh, yes, I am perfectly satisfied, as far as your warrant is concerned. But between ourselves, I would like to point out that there are few things without their price in this ignoble world—and my surrender of Don Giacinto and his wife cannot be among those few. You quite see the position, do you not? As I said, just now, the Duke is in great financial embarrassments, and so—a small loan—quite so.”

During a few seconds Prince Bordelacqua continued to sit still whilst he digested the Baron's meaning; and then, with a grimace of invincible repugnance for the nature of the transaction in which he was about to involve himself:

“What is your price?” he asked roughly.

The Baron smiled again as he noted the grimace.

“As to that, it will not be easy for me to suggest any exact sum before consulting with the Duke,” he replied. “I mentioned the possibility of your arrival in Mantua to him as soon as I learned of it, although I have not yet informed his Highness of

the real identity of Don Giacinto and Donna Fiordelisa. Nor have I any intention of doing so; and I am going to ask you to follow my example in the matter. At the same time, I propose to keep his Highness equally in ignorance of the fact of my previous acquaintance with yourself."

The Prince did not answer at once; he was thinking how, perhaps, he might even now contrive to get Giacinto and Fiordelisa away from Mantua and so into his own hands by disarming their suspicions in a personal interview.

"I should like to pay my respects to the Duke," he said suddenly. "It is some years since I last had the felicity of doing so. Can you arrange an audience for me?"

"Nothing would give me greater pleasure," returned the other, to whom the notion of thus bringing Bordelacqua into actual sight of his son—only to cheat him of his prey afterwards—appealed humorously. "If you will breakfast with me, presently, we will go out together; later on, to the Palazzo del Té."

"Thank you, but I have no appetite,"—the effrontery of this invitation of the Baron's to the former patron whose honour he had defiled, caused Prince Bordelacqua almost to forget himself and to spring upon the smiling, insolent creature at the writing table. As it was, he uttered the refusal chokingly;

his chin trembled and his eyes smouldered with repressed fury.

The invitation to eat breakfast with him was really simply a jest on the part of De Curtis and merely intended by him to enrage Prince Bordelacqua, in the same way that the "banderilleros" plant their be-ribboned darts into the shoulders of a bull at a bull-fight. So that he only shrugged his shoulders a little and smiled his usual rather timid smile.

"In that case I will not detain you, my dear Prince," he said, "since I myself must plead guilty to an excellent appetite which I propose to satisfy as quickly as possible. If you will come back here for me in a couple of hours' time I shall be ready to go with you to the Duke. Until then you will find excellent quarters either at the Hotel Giangastone in the Via Virgiliana or else at the "Chained Swan" in the Corso Sant' Egidio. You need only mention my name at either place to make sure of being treated honestly," he concluded as a parting shaft.

Prince Bordelacqua did not vouchsafe any answer to this last speech, but turned abruptly away and walked out of the room. It was the first time in all his life that he had ever been dismissed at the conclusion of an interview—except by the Pope in person, and that invariably with all the consideration of a sovereign for his most exalted subject. Moreover, he was not thinking of De Curtis at all, but

of how either to ensnare or else to silence Giacinto and Fiordelisa. As he walked back along the corridor and down the stone stairs to the street where Stürmli was waiting for him with the gendarmes, his plan of action became clearer to him. There are times, he reflected, when it is compulsory upon the commander of an army to divide his forces in order to engage his adversary on two points at once; and in his own case, he decided, this was unquestionably just such an occasion. Yes; whilst he himself remained to pursue his game within the walls of Mantua, Stürmli should be posted beyond them to foil any attempt of the fugitives to break out of the city along the roads to the eastward in the event of there arising some unforeseen hitch in the negotiations for their surrender by the Duke and his unspeakable minion, De Curtis.

On reaching the street he inquired of the gendarme who had previously conducted him to the Minister of Police the whereabouts of the Via Virgiliana. Having learned it, he thanked his informant and presented the two soldiers with a piece of silver between them for their pains; then mounted his horse and rode on, up the road in the direction of the Hotel Giangastone, followed by Stürmli.

When he had had something to eat, and was refreshed with hot water and soap and the services

of a barber, Prince Bordelacqua sent down word to Stürmlì to come up to him in his room at the hotel.

“Sor Antonio,” he addressed him, when the Swiss made his appearance, “I need your counsel. Therefore be seated, and fill a glass of wine for yourself,” pointing to where a flask of Valpolicella, the bubbling red wine of Verona, stood upon a table with the remains of his breakfast. “It is like this: I learn that Don Giacinto and Donna Fiordelisa are here in Mantua—or, rather, just outside the walls—as guests of his Highness, the Duke, in the Palazzo del Té, the villa that we passed on the right-hand side immediately before entering the town. You remember it? Good! Gozzoli, I presume, is with them.

“In an hour I am going to the Palazzo del Té to ask the Duke to deliver them all three to me. If he consents, well and good; if he refuses—as it seems to me perfectly possible he may do—then I shall have to employ other methods in the matter. That is to say that I shall have to take Don Giacinto and Donna Fiordelisa prisoners by the use of my own hands and with your help.

“For the present, therefore, I wish you to post yourself at a little distance from the town and on the road to Trevigliano, so that, if need be, you can either turn them back or else follow them until an

opportunity presents itself of—but let me ask you a question, Sor Antonio.”

Stürmli leaned forward with respectful attention and his master continued:

“ You acknowledge my authority over my family and my household, do you not, Sor Antonio? ”

“ But of course, most illustrious One! ”

The Prince nodded approvingly.

“ Very well. Then know that, in the event of their further endeavouring to elude that just authority which Heaven has given me over them, I am compelled sorrowfully to condemn both Don Giacinto and Donna Fiordelisa to the extreme penalty of the law. Do you understand me? And, if so, are you prepared to execute my sentence upon them, Sor Antonio? ”

Stürmli looked at Prince Bordelacqua before answering, and the pupils of his green eyes shrank until they were scarcely larger than pinheads.

“ I understand,” he said, “ and I am prepared to carry out the sentence if necessary and if possible.”

“ Good, good! Well, what is it? ”—seeing that Stürmli had something that he wished to say.

“ Most illustrious One, there is a certain small piece of land with a house on it belonging to you between Albano and Genzano——”

“ Do you mean the farm of Castelfranco? ”

“ It was that, yes, that I had in mind, *Signor Principe*—”

Prince Bordelacqua rose quickly from his chair, and for about a minute walked up and down the room without speaking.

“ So be it,” he said at last. “ If it has to be done, you shall have the farm of Castelfranco for doing it.”

“ I thank your Highness,” answered Stürmlí, from where he was now standing by the window. “ Will you be displeased with me if I venture to beg yet a further favour of your condescension ? ”

The Prince understood perfectly what his captain of halberdiers meant by this—that he should give a written understanding in the matter of the farm, so that Stürmlí might have something to hold over him in case he should attempt to evade his verbal promise later on.

“ I cannot give you anything except my word that I will carry out my agreement with you,” he said. “ For this reason: that if some misfortune were to come to you—supposing you should be killed, for instance, Sor Antonio—and my written promise in regard to the farm of Castelfranco were to fall into other hands, what defence would be left to me? Stay, though—I think I can satisfy you. Listen to this: if I fail to redeem my promise to you in this matter—provided always that I am then still in full

possession of my faculties, and so, morally responsible—may my soul burn everlastinglly. And I take God to witness what I say. Are you content?"

For all answer, Anton Stürmli moved quickly to his master and fell upon his knees beside him; then he took the Prince's yellow, finely shaped right hand in both his own, kissed it and touched it to his forehead. The compact was now completed between them.

So it came about that, when Prince Bordelacqua presently left the Hotel Giangastone for the Ministry of Police, he did so alone, for Stürmli had already ridden out of Mantua in the opposite direction by way of the bridge of Saint George and the road leading towards the River Adige. The streets of Mantua itself were by this time echoing to the chiming of church-bells calling the people to Mass; for it was Sunday, and a whole week had gone by since the flight of Don Giacinto from his prison in the Sabines. As Prince Bordelacqua rode slowly towards the southern quarter of the town and the Palace of Justice where he was to meet the man he hated, the sound of the bells seemed to him to confirm the righteousness of his enterprise and he raised his hat in acknowledgment of their approval.

De Curtis was ready for him when he arrived; the Minister of Police was on horseback in front of the building and quite by himself. His horse was evi-

dently a well-trained one and thoroughly accustomed to the enjoyment of its master's confidence, seeing that he had let fall the reins upon its neck and was poring over a book that he held carefully in both hands. His hat, too, that he had taken off the while he read from the book, was held close to his body under his arm. As the Prince drew nigh, De Curtis glanced up irritably, as though in annoyance at being disturbed. Closing the book, however, and slipping it into his pocket, he smiled apologetically as he resumed his hat and set his horse in motion in the direction whence Bordelacqua was approaching.

“ You are punctual, *Signor Principe*,” he remarked as they came together. “ We shall be just in time to catch his Highness before he goes out hunting—for I am sorry to say that he is not much addicted to distinguishing between Sunday and the other days of the week. But, in case you yourself may not yet have been to Mass to-day, there will be one said near by here in the Church of San Sebastiano at eleven o'clock.”

CHAPTER XVII

THE Prince nodded, but did not say anything; and the two men rode in silence through the southern gate of the town and so out to the Palazzo del Té. Here they left their horses at the stables and, still without speaking, entered the house and having made their way past the small gathering of courtiers, went on upstairs to the door of the Duke's apartment, where there ensued a whispered colloquy between his valet and the Minister of Police.

Presently the valet disappeared into the room; emerging again almost immediately to say that his Highness would receive Baron Marcaria and Prince Bordelacqua at once. Going in, they found him seated in a deep armchair in the middle of the floor, his face lathered for shaving and a razor in his hand, whilst Vendramin held up a mirror before him as prescribed by the usage of the Court of France.

Having smiled and nodded, Duke Charles proceeded to shave himself, during which process no word was spoken. When at last it was over, and the valet—one Bisceglia, long afterwards of sinister celebrity in connection with the tragic story of Marianne Laurier—had brought a silver-gilt basin of water and a sponge and the ducal face had been

cleansed of soap, Charles IV held out a hand towards his latest visitor.

“ My dear Prince, I remember well how I had the happiness of seeing you when last you were passing through my little domain,” he said. “ It was some years ago now, but you have not changed at all. And so my good fortune has again brought you to Mantua; I hope to enjoy a talk with you if you will favour me with your company for half an hour.”

Although in his heart he cursed the necessity of thus putting off his hunting party for so long, Duke Charles submitted to it with the most creditable assumption of pleasure for the sake of the financial advantages to be derived from it. In the very brief interview that he had had with De Curtis on the subject, the latter had said nothing of the means by which he proposed to extort the sum of money required from Prince Bordelacqua; nor had he informed his patron, hitherto, as to the real identity of the Signora Gandara and her husband; albeit he was beginning to doubt the likelihood of his being able to countenance their “ *incognito* ” much longer, in view of the fact that Prince Bordelacqua himself would almost certainly make known the truth—and it would never do for De Curtis himself to be preceded by anyone in the disclosing of such a thing to the Duke. Indeed, the need of making sure that Bordelacqua should not forestall him in this began

to trouble the Minister of Police so acutely that he resolved to secure his own position in the matter as soon as possible and that in spite of what he had said to the Prince in reference to the subject at their first meeting a couple of hours earlier.

In this resolution, therefore, De Curtis bent his head to murmur a suggestion to the personage in the armchair.

“I have something for the private ear of your Highness,” he let fall so that none but the Duke heard what it was that he said; and then, on receiving a nod of permission, he turned to Prince Bordelacqua and Vendramin. “His Highness,” he said, “desires to speak with me alone, during a minute or two, gentlemen.”

They had thus, perforce, to leave the room; and when they were gone, De Curtis made his explanations to his sovereign regarding the true identity of Signora Gandara and her husband and their relationship to Prince Bordelacqua; but, although he gave the Duke some account of Don Giacinto’s imprisonment by his father and of his escape from Acquanera, yet he said nothing at all of the events that had led up to the young man’s incarceration—since not for the world would he have spoiled the blow he had in store for the torturer and the assassin of Donna Giulia by delivering it beforehand.

For it was evident to De Curtis that Bordelacqua

believed him to be in ignorance as to whose had been the hand at which the Princess had met her death; also, he had a shrewd suspicion that neither Fiorde-lisa nor even Giacinto himself—any more than the world in general, including the Papal government, seeing that the old man was still at large—had quite sounded the depths of Prince Bordelacqua's iniquities. At any rate, he was anxious to find out whether or not they knew of the false charge under which the Prince had thus been enabled to keep his eldest son—the only living witness, so far as knew, of his killing of his unhappy wife—in durance and dumbness in a stronghold of the Sabines, during four long years.

De Curtis could not help hoping, almost, that they might be in ignorance of the actual extent of their father and father-in-law's meanness and cruelty, so that he himself might have the exquisite enjoyment of enlightening them. On the other hand, if they knew of the monstrous accusation against Giacinto, and so were suffering under their inability to disprove it, then how unspeakably great would be their relief and exultation on learning that the guilt had been publicly shifted from their innocent shoulders to those of the real criminal! For, in spite of all the old bickerings between Giacinto and himself, there was no comparison in the mind of the former "*cavaliere servente*" between his antipathy for Giacinto and his all-consuming hatred of Prince Bordelacqua.

"As your Highness will, I am sure, agree with me, we have before us the prospect of an interesting interview when the truants are confronted with their parent and pursuer," he went on softly. "Prince Bordelacqua I find quite willing to do business with us on the basis of a simple commercial transaction—as I foretold to your Highness last night."

"Oh, curse the money! Do you expect me to sell *her* to that old wolf for so many ducats down? It is not to be thought of, I say! You can sell him back his tiresome son if you like, my dear—and if he is fool enough to buy him—but Fiordelisa is mine. We are twin souls, she and I! Did you ever see such hair and eyes as hers in all your days, *caro vecchio*? No, no—I will never consent to give her up!"

"But that may not be necessary at all," De Curtis replied reassuringly. "If your Highness will but trust yourself completely to me, I do not think you will have reason to be dissatisfied with the result. May I count upon your doing so?"

"I will do anything you wish, provided only that you keep Donna Fiordelisa safe for me out of Bordelacqua's talons—and that you contrive to separate her from her oaf of a husband," replied Duke Charles as he sank back in the chair and closed his eyes a moment, the better to conjure up the picture of Fiordelisa. All things taken into consideration, he was rather tickled than otherwise by the discovery

that she was a great lady and a person of importance, and that his intended retention of her at Mantua would in all probability make a lot of other important people very angry—a prospect which added infinitely to his relish for the adventure in hand.

“Then, with your Highness’ consent, I will send word to the young lady and her husband to come at once to the small council chamber, where I shall await them with Prince Bordelacqua.” De Curtis would have preferred to keep the details of the coming interview as much as possible a secret between himself and those other three who alone, of all the people in the duchy of Mantua, were acquainted with his past; but, to his chagrin, the Duke’s curiosity to witness so interesting a scene as the meeting of Prince Bordelacqua and the young people under the auspices of his Minister of Police, defeated this intention.

“Do—and I will presently give myself the pleasure of joining you,” assented Charles. “Only remember—whatever else happens, Donna Fiordelisa remains my guest. That is far more to me than any sordid question of money—for, as you know, I am above all things, a man of heart, *Agostino mio.*”

“And now—what next?” Fiordelisa asked herself as she watched Giacinto standing moodily beside the window in their room that looked out towards

the city walls and the wide ditches below them, in which the sluggish water had never stirred for centuries except when its surface was ruffled by the wind or rain, or when a passing flight of wild duck sank to rest upon the brackish face of it. "What next? Are we free to continue on our journey? Or are we really prisoners in the power of the man to whom this house belongs?"

For she and Giacinto, having risen for the day and having breakfasted upon a pot of chocolate and some cakes brought to them upon their ringing for it, were now waiting to see what might be next about to happen. They had agreed that their wisest course was to attempt nothing in the way of an escape until they—or rather, Fiordelisa—should have seen De Curtis again and have learned from him what to expect from his master.

As Fiordelisa was thus in the act of putting the question to herself, it was answered for her by the tread of footsteps approaching the door followed by a voice asking if the Signora Gandara were within. So softly was the inquiry made that it was audible only to Fiordelisa herself, who arose at sound of it from where she had been sitting on the sofa in the middle of the room and moved swiftly to open the door. Giacinto, however, who had heard nothing, remained where he was by the window with his back to the room; until suddenly he heard the hum of

whispering behind him and turned round to see Fiordelisa and De Curtis engaged in confabulation at the further end of the room. So enraging to Giacinto was the spectacle of his wife conversing thus familiarly with this man that, as in witnessing their previous interview, it was almost beyond his strength to keep from attacking him.

De Curtis was telling Fiordelisa of what was awaiting her; and she, on her side, was marvelling at his kindness in the face of Giacinto's resolute ungraciousness towards him—for she could not know that what De Curtis did he did for the sake of Giacinto's mother and for hate of Prince Bordelacqua.

“The Prince is here now,” he was saying, “and so I thought it best to prepare you for the meeting. I have had to tell the Duke who you really are—or else he must have learned it from Prince Bordelacqua, which would have been a pity. His Highness fully sympathises with you in your need for travelling *incognito*; you need fear no criticism from him on that account. He desires, though, that you and Don Giacinto should meet Prince Bordelacqua in his presence as the Prince has brought a sort of warrant with him which will entail certain formalities.”

“Are you going to surrender us to him—is that the meaning of your words?” asked Fiordelisa in rising agitation. “Oh, if I thought so——”

She fell back a few steps, her face still towards

him, and her hands behind her as though she were feeling for a weapon with which either to punish him for the treachery of which she suspected him or else to make a way to freedom for herself and Giacinto. As the latter now came forward threateningly and passed by her towards the other man, Fiordelisa caught him by the arm and held him back, while De Curtis stood there, neither smiling at their uneasiness nor frowning at the imputation cast upon him by their attitude, but only gazing at them almost as though he did not see them and were lost, in dubious thought, to his surroundings. To tell the truth, indeed, he was not thinking at all, just then, either of Fiordelisa or Giacinto, but of the secret past, a very faint breath of the ghostly fragrance of which seemed to have come back to him for an instant.

All at once he returned to realities.

"Are you ready?" he asked. "Then will you be so good as to follow me?" There was nothing in his manner to show that he was even conscious of the accusation of Fiordelisa's words or of the menace of Giacinto's attitude.

As they still hesitated, he allowed himself yet another few seconds for reflection in order to determine on his course of action, for he felt that the destinies of these two young people might, for the time being at all events, have been placed in his hands. And so he stood there in silence for a space, during which

Fiordelisa and her husband watched him with an indescribable anxiety. At last he glanced behind him, as though to make sure that no one else were within sight or hearing and then came close to Fiordelisa before speaking.

“Please attend very carefully to what I am going to tell you,” he murmured, “because everything is going to depend upon your doing so. The room to which I am going to take you has only one door and there is no bell in the room, which is in a remote part of the palace and on the same floor as this. You can reach the stables from it in less than a minute. There is a long table in the room; when we go in we shall find the Duke sitting at the end of the table furthest from the door, with Prince Bordelacqua in a chair on his left hand. You, yourself, Donna Fiordelisa, will take the seat on the Duke’s right and Don Giacinto will sit next to you; and I will place myself at the foot of the table, between Don Giacinto and Prince Bordelacqua—I have a reason for this, as you will see.

“And now for the most important part of it all. There will come a moment when I shall say something that will astonish both Don Giacinto and Prince Bordelacqua—in all likelihood, the Prince will show violence and I shall rise from my chair and push it between us. When you see me do so, Donna Fiordelisa, you and Don Giacinto are to come quickly be-

hind me and to slip out of the room before any one can prevent you. The key of the door is on the outside,—I have already seen to that, myself. Whatever you do, do not forget to turn it as you go, and to lock us in. After that, run down to the stables—and remember that the loss or gain of a minute may decide the fate of both of you. As you have now only two horses left, you had better borrow another to make up the three you need. There are very few grooms about the place at this hour, of a Sunday, so that you will have no difficulty in getting what you want. Moreover, as guests of the Duke, no one will dare to ask any questions of you."

He ceased abruptly, and proceeded to lead the way along the corridor to the room where the meeting with Prince Bordelacqua was to take place. A kind of apathy had suddenly fallen upon De Curtis, a momentary reaction from the recent excitement of the meetings with the three people whom he had scarcely expected ever to see again. Indeed he was surprised to find that his only emotion was one of mild thankfulness at the thought of Fiordelisa's and Giacinto's probable escape—if all went well—from the toils of their enemies.

Fiordelisa had not replied to De Curtis' amazing last speech because her tongue was tied with surprise and perplexity at his attitude, which was rather that of a confederate of her own and of Giacinto's,

than of the Duke of Mantua's Minister of Police. As to Giacinto himself, he was not yet quite sure what De Curtis' object might be in thus standing his friend and Fiordelisa's at this juncture. Some kind of treachery, as like as not, he persisted in telling himself; and so, he, too, forbore from offering any comment by way of a rejoinder, but followed with Fiordelisa in the elder man's wake. And yet, in spite of all his unchanging hatred of De Curtis, Giacinto could not help feeling a certain unwelcome growing conviction that the "Lickplate" was actuated by some interior motive of genuine kindness towards Fiordelisa and himself; and the possibility of such a thing, combined with the thought that he was about to come face to face again with his father, upon whom he had not set eyes since they had grappled with each other in mortal fight in the labyrinth of Palazzo Bordelacqua, made Giacinto's head swim for an instant. At once, however, he recovered his balance and summoned all his strength of mind and energy for the approaching encounter.

At last De Curtis came to a halt before a door through which the subdued murmur of voices in talk came out into the gallery; before knocking on the door, he pointed to the key in the back of it and smiled.

" You are sure you know what to do? " he whispered to Fiordelisa, and, on her nodding an affirma-

tive, he drew out from the deep cuff of his coat-sleeve a folded paper which he held out towards Giacinto, signifying with a movement of the thumb and finger that he should put it in his pocket.

“Passport”—De Curtis’ lips shaped themselves to the word rather than gave actual utterance to it, and again he smiled—for he knew what doubts and suspicions had been passing in Giacinto’s thoughts concerning himself. And he had purposely prolonged the period of the young man’s suspense as much as possible by thus deferring to the last moment the transmission to him of the document without which no traveller could hope to pass in safety through the lines of the French and Austrian armies that confronted each other to the east of Mantua in the plain between the Adige and the Mincio. And the flush of confusion and vexation and relief that sprang to Giacinto’s cheek, as he took the passport from De Curtis, was the latter’s sole revenge for all that had gone before.

Opening the door, he stood aside for Fiordelisa and Giacinto to pass by him into the room, which was long and rather narrow with only a single window to it in the wall opposite the door; as De Curtis had said, there was a long table there flanked by highbacked chairs, in one of which at the head of the table, sat the Duke of Mantua, and beside him, in another, Prince Bordelacqua.

When Fiordelisa saw the Prince she stood still and stared at him as if there were something in his appearance that fascinated and, at the same time, repelled her. The fact was, that she could not quite bring herself to admit that half the evil she was inclined to believe of him could be true, so mild and amiable did he look now as he sat there conversing with the Duke. As he turned his head, however, to see who it was that had entered, there came into his eyes the same swift change of colour that she had seen in them on the occasion of her first conference with him after her return to Rome from Castel Gandolfo.

“Well, my child, and so we meet again,” he said, rising to his feet. “What have you to say for yourself, Fiordelisa?” But, of Giacinto, he took no notice whatsoever, not even letting his glance dwell an instant upon his son. “I have been speaking with his Highness and have laid before him——” he got no further, however, before Fiordelisa took him up.

“I have this to say,” she answered quickly, for fear lest Giacinto, too, should be before her with some reply that might precipitate a scene of violence —“that my husband and I ask only for the right of every law-abiding human being—the right to live unmolested and free from interference. We are doing no wrong, and——”

“Doing no wrong? When you are deliberately

setting all law and religion at defiance by attempting to break away from the legal control of your guardian and your father!—but I decline to waste words upon you."

At this, Giacinto's last remnant of self-control abandoned him. Putting Fiordelisa aside, he came forward to the table, over which he leaned menacingly as he addressed his father in tones that vibrated with fury.

"And what have *you* to say for yourself?" he demanded. "What have *you* to say for depriving me of my liberty—and for having done your utmost to deprive me of my birthright and my wife? Answer me, will you?"

"You forget yourself, sir," Duke Charles here put in hastily. "I really must ask you to remember what is due to—to your company. And, besides, everything is being done in strict accordance with the requirements of the law. Your father, Prince Bor-delacqua, has perfectly satisfied me of his right to apprehend you. He holds a warrant from the Papal Government empowering him to do so. You cannot refuse to obey it."

"I utterly refuse—" Giacinto was beginning, more hotly than ever when De Curtis checked him with a touch on the arm.

"One moment, if you please, Don Giacinto," he said. "I wish to say something if you will allow

me. As his Highness observes, Prince Bordelacqua is provided with a warrant from the Legate at Spoleto for your arrest. With his Highness' consent"—bowing towards the Duke, who made a gesture of agreement—"I think it is only just that the warrant should be read to you before any further steps are taken in the matter, so that you may be satisfied as to its legality"—glancing for a second with malignant humour at Bordelacqua.

"Very proper, indeed—I quite agree with you, Baron," said the Duke. "Where is the warrant, by the way?"

This suggestion of reading out the warrant in front of Giacinto and of disclosing to him the whole tale of cruel untruth and fraud by which he had been held a prisoner at Acquanera and was now again threatened with the loss, not only of his liberty, but of his wife as well, and of his birthright—was the last that Prince Bordelacqua was willing to entertain.

"I see nothing to be gained by such a course as that which you propose," he replied to De Curtis. "Nothing can in any way alter the main facts of the case; and besides—" and he fell to whispering behind his hand to the Duke who beckoned to De Curtis to come near and to join in their bated colloquy; this the Minister of Police did, the while Fior delisa and Giacinto looked on in silence and in some-

thing not very far removed from despair. As sometimes happens to young and untried persons when brought into actual contact with a great danger from which their ultimate deliverance has been practically assured to them beforehand, so now Giacinto and his wife almost forgot the stratagem by which De Curtis had previously furnished them with a means of escape, and for the time being they saw nothing before them but the prospect of being delivered again into the hands of their tormentors.

And then to their utmost incredulous astonishment, they heard De Curtis say:

“In my official capacity, I must insist upon being at least allowed to look through the warrant once more before I can conscientiously sanction such a thing. You cannot refuse that much, Prince.”

For the latter had just been pleading the danger to Giacinto’s mind of learning that, in his madness, he had taken his mother’s life, as a reason for withholding from him the precise terms of the warrant. And now, as it seemed to the Prince, he had gained his point.

“Oh, as to that, why no, of course. I have not the slightest objection to your doing so,” he returned, producing the folded parchment and dropping it contemptuously on the table between them. “I doubt if you will be able to pick any holes in it, though.”

"Really," protested the Duke, "it seems to me, Agostino *mio*, that you are inclined to quibble over these details. However, satisfy yourself and have done with it—since you must"—and his gaze wandered to where Fiordelisa sat beside Giacinto near the door.

De Curtis did not speak, but picked up the warrant in silence, unfolded and proceeded—to all appearances—to become interested in the nature of its contents. In reality, he was thinking of the riddle of it; the riddle of whether Don Giacinto knew of what was in it concerning himself or not. All along De Curtis had been inclined to think not; it was in that opinion that he had spoken to Fiordelisa of the likelihood of his presently saying something that might surprise both Don Giacinto himself and Prince Bordelacqua as well.

"Well?" The voice of Duke Charles it was that broke in upon his thoughts. "Is there anything amiss with the warrant?"

Thereupon De Curtis looked up from his study of the document.

"Yes, there is," he said.

"Eh?" queried the Duke as though he had not heard aright. At the same time Prince Bordelacqua pushed back his chair as if under the galvanic thrill of some sudden supreme necessity for violence. Also, he threw upon Giacinto, who was waiting spellbound

for De Curtis' next words, such a look as made Fiordelisa whisper in her husband's ear:

“For Heaven's sake—remember the door——”

Giacinto, though, did not appear to have heard her, but was staring at De Curtis, who was sitting at the end of the table with his back to the door, his forehead supported in one hand so that his face was half shaded by the fingers of it.

The air in the room felt to Fiordelisa to be thick and heavy with the sense of some impending crisis in the lives of Giacinto and of Prince Bordelacqua, and of herself. Even Duke Charles, who was leaning forward with his hands on the arms of his chair, betrayed a new nervous interest in what his Minister of Police might be about to say next.

“There is something very seriously amiss with this warrant,” the latter resumed in low, even tones, without raising his head as he did so, “since Don Giacinto Bordelacqua is accused in it of a crime that he did not commit.”

“Are you mad, sir?” exclaimed Prince Bordelacqua, springing to his feet, while Giacinto, unable to restrain himself, flung out a hand and snatched the little sheet of parchment away from where it lay in front of De Curtis, who made no effort to prevent him, but only sat there with his eyes fixed on the Prince. Fiordelisa in the meanwhile had risen too, and was come behind De Curtis, where she stood

against the door, ready to carry out his advice at any moment; she was less concerned with what Giacinto was doing than she was anxious for their mutual escape.

When Prince Bordelacqua saw Giacinto snatch the warrant from the table and proceed to read it, he made a stride forward as if with the intention of going round to where he stood, and of taking it from him by force; but the way was blocked by De Curtis, who drew his chair across it.

Just then, Giacinto's hand that held the warrant fell to his side and he looked up at his father across the table with an expression of such anguish and horror as to make Fiordelisa leave the door and go back to him. Taking the warrant from between his fingers she read it that she might see what it was that had so moved him, and what might be the crime mentioned in it—whether or not it were that of which Prince Bordelacqua had once accused him to her.

Yes, there it was in black and white and in Latin, that same hideous accusation which, although she had always vanquished it, had more than once returned to its assault upon her mind—"forasmuch as the said Lord Hyacinth Bordelacqua did (not wickedly, being of notorious, unsound mind, but perversely and in anger and of purpose aforeset) kill by means of a sword his mother, the most noble and virtuous lady, Julia——"

And now Fiordelisa, also, raised her eyes to look full into those of the man across the table; then she turned again to scan Giacinto's face as though to assure herself of what she read there. In that scrutiny the whole truth was made plain to her—Giacinto's entire innocence; his ignorance even of the charge under which he had laboured so long; his horrified reproach of his father's injustice and cruelty towards him; in brief the full extent of Prince Bordelacqua's iniquity.

“Say on, Baron,” Duke Charles broke the silence by commanding with an assumption of sternness. “We are waiting for some explanation of your extraordinary statement.”

Thus enjoined, De Curtis inclined respectfully in his chair, at the same time contriving to bring the mouth of his capacious coat-pocket within easy reach of his right hand as he did so, cleared his voice, and replied:

“Your Highness, I can only repeat that, in the warrant presented by Prince Bordelacqua, Don Giacinto Bordelacqua is accused of having committed, in a moment of frenzy, a crime of which he is as innocent as your Highness or myself—the crime of matricide. And I am in a position to prove the truth of what I say, seeing that”—here he drew out from his pocket the same pistol with which he had previously compelled his adversary to listen to him,

and held it in readiness below the level of the table —“ I myself was a witness of Princess Bordelacqua’s cruel death and can testify to the truth of what I saw with my own eyes.”

He paused to mark the effect of his speech upon the two persons most closely affected by it. Of these, Giacinto was still standing by the table, his eyes still turned upon his father with the same look of horrified astonishment in them; one of his hands was clasped in that nearest him of Fiordelisa, who held the warrant she had been reading in the other. Like Giacinto, she was gazing across the table at Prince Bordelacqua, who, on his side, was looking down at De Curtis with quite a new expression, in which momentary fear mingled with disbelief and new resolve. Suddenly, he shrugged his shoulders and resumed his seat. But his voice shook unmistakably as he accepted the challenge of De Curtis, for he was staggered by this utterly unexpected turn of things. And yet the possibility of De Curtis being in possession of the truth as to how the Princess had come to her end, was far less terrible to him than the thought that the man might be about to betray the whole miserable history of his own relations with her. And so it was that he answered De Curtis as he did, with a veiled threat.

“ Then be so good as to speak plainly, sir,” he

said. "And remember that after to-day will come to-morrow."

"Come, come, Agostino, what is all this mystery of yours?" cried the Duke, impatient for the promised feast of rich sensation. "What do you know about the business?"

But the habits of a lifetime were fast asserting their dominion over the soul of De Curtis; already the prospect of the laceration that he had been prepared to inflict upon himself by telling the tale of his love for Donna Giulia and of hers for him, and of how the final tragedy had been brought about through the discovery of their love by her husband, was almost beyond him to endure. Although he told himself that the only reparation that was in his power to make to Donna Giulia was to clear her son of the charge of being her murderer; although he told himself, moreover, that by so doing, he would avenge them all three—Donna Giulia, Giacinto and himself—to the full upon Prince Bordelacqua; yet, somehow, now that he was come to it, his resolution was failing him.

A score of excuses presented themselves to him for not carrying out his former intention of simply telling the truth, be the consequences to himself what they would. Was it not possible, for instance, that Don Giacinto might even refuse to save himself at the price of his mother's honour—that he might prefer

to give the lie to all and everything that he, De Curtis, should say about the dead Princess? And so it would be all to no purpose—or only to that of branding himself as the most senseless and vilest of liars—that he should have defiled the memory of the beloved woman and have betrayed her dear frailty to the whole world in the person of Charles of Gonzaga, fourth and basest Duke of Mantua!

“Are you ill?” the latter was asking. “Then why do you not speak?”

Thereupon De Curtis spoke again at last.

“Most Illustrious,” he said, “let Don Giacinto Bordelacqua here, say how it really is, whether the warrant is a true one or not. Whatever he shall say is the truth.”

On hearing this, Prince Bordelacqua leaned forward, as though to interpose himself between Giacinto and the question that De Curtis had invited the Duke to put to him. Here was the one moment that he had been trying for years to fend against in the uncertainty of its outcome, the moment of Giacinto’s opportunity to choose between his mother’s honour and his own welfare; following as it did, immediately upon the young man’s discovery of his father’s perfidy towards him, Prince Bordelacqua could not but think that Giacinto would inevitably denounce him.

“Well, sir, you hear what Baron Marcaria says,” the Duke went on, addressing himself to Giacinto.

“What have you to say? Are you guilty or not guilty of killing your mother? Or do you, perhaps, remember nothing about it. Ah, that is it, I fancy—I think you do not remember”—encouragingly, since he was only desirous of an excuse for handing over Donna Fiordelisa’s inconvenient husband to be cared for by his family as a person of unsound mind.

But Giacinto stood there beside his Fiordelisa all incapable of answering, rent as he was by conflicting passions and emotions. His first feeling was that he must either speak or else die of the suppressed anger and indignation that threatened to darken his whole understanding. A film of red seemed to float before his eyes and his ears to be filling with the roar of waters, through the din of which he was dimly conscious of something that Fiordelisa was saying to him:

“No, no, no—say that it is not true—tell the Duke how it really was, Giacinto—that you remember everything and that you are innocent, as I know you are—”

And yet he did not speak, although his confusion was passing away and he was beginning to see and think clearly once more. And now as he saw the thing as it was, a sudden rigidity seized upon him, causing him to clench his hands and his face to take on a kind of hardness and angularity—for he was being torn between his innate instincts and his purely

human desires and yearnings; and the struggle was a frightful one. He must choose between saving himself by telling the truth, and so betraying his mother, or going back with his father as a prisoner to Acquanera. Everything else but this, the choice that confronted him, had completely gone from Giacinto—the mental area, so to speak, occupied by that agonising problem was, for the time being, the only living portion of his brain, the rest being as it were, temporarily paralysed. On the one side, he was grappled by the hooks of honour and pride and that all-consuming selflessness so often the prerogative of youth; on the other, by those of wife and freedom and the joy of life that rested in him—the magic of hills and woods, the open sky and the play of sun and cloud, the fragrance of wild flowers, the merry music of song-birds in brake and thicket and grove, the lure of horse and sword and woodland tarn. And, as he fought his fight, cold beads of sweat broke out upon his forehead, and trickled down his face as if he were wrestling with the King of Terrors himself.

And then, all at once, the struggle was over and a great weakness took possession of Giacinto. Stumbling slightly, he turned and bestowed upon his wife a look that pierced her soul.

She had no means of knowing the details of the process by which Giacinto had arrived at the decision that she read in his face; but this much she under-

stood, that he was bidding her farewell—that he was on the point of sacrificing, not only himself, but her as well, for some unknown but all-powerful reason. She saw that Prince Bordelacqua had half risen once again from his chair and that he was in the very act of taking advantage of the momentary carelessness of De Curtis—who had turned his head to watch Giacinto—in order to possess himself of the pistol lying on the table in front of his enemy.

His eyes met those of Fiordelisa as she detected his intention. In a flash she saw the danger and her opportunity with it. Almost together their hands snatched for the weapon; but Fiordelisa was the quicker of the two. The next instant the pistol was hers and the muzzle of it was turned upon Bordelacqua from over the shoulder of De Curtis. Simultaneously, Duke Charles, at the head of the table, put his hands in front of his face as if to protect it, and cried out to De Curtis to take the pistol away from Fiordelisa. But De Curtis, situated as he was, with his back to her, could do nothing, and said so plainly.

“Neither I, any more than your Highness, can raise a finger at present without Donna Fiordelisa’s consent,” he returned resignedly enough, crossing his knees as he spoke. “Therefore, I think we had better make terms with her—so to speak—as quickly as possible. Otherwise, your Highness may be de-

layed in starting for the chase, and Prince Bordelacqua be kept from attending Mass."

In thus delivering himself, it was all he could do to hide his thankfulness for the crowning mercy of this outcome to the situation. It was long since he had put up such a heartfelt silent prayer of gratitude as he did now—both on the dead woman's account and on his own.

As for Giacinto, when he saw what Fiordelisa had done, he experienced the sensations of a man who has been walking in unknown places in a dense fog, when, all unexpectedly, the fog lifts and he finds himself standing on the very lip of a precipice—another step and he would have trodden in space. To be sure, he felt rather sick; nevertheless, a new accesss of energy came to his rescue, as he realised that Fiordelisa was so overcome by the boldness of her own deed that she could not think how next to act.

"Give it to me, *carina*," he said, taking the pistol from her. "And now his Highness will write out an order for another horse to be supplied to us for you to ride during the rest of the journey. You will take it down to the stable and give it to Gozzoli and tell him to make ready for us to start out at once. Wait for me with him." And, to the Duke—"I must trouble you to bestir yourself, sir; time presses and the thing is urgent."

Without attempting to make any answer, Charles

of Gonzaga did as he was told to do; seizing a piece of paper from a supply that lay on the table beside a bronze inkstand and sand-box together with some quills, he wrote hastily, shook some of the sand over the writing and pushed it over, all without a word, towards De Curtis, who gave it to Fiordelisa.

“Read it out, *carina*,” said Giacinto. And so she read it:

“‘Supply the bearer with a horse to carry a lady. Charles.’”

“That will do. Take it down to Gozzoli,” he told her. “Stay, though,” as an idea came to him; “when the horses are ready tell Gozzoli to leave them in the stable and to come up here to me with three strong straps. And do you wait for us with the horses, Fiordelisa.”

Fiordelisa understood his purpose and nodded her approval of it. Then she went quickly out, and Giacinto was left alone with his three prisoners, still covering them with the pistol.

“Signor De Curtis,” he said,—“forgive me, I should say Baron Marcaria—I will ask you to write out for me as brief as possible a statement of what you know to the establishment of my innocence in regard to a certain matter. His Highness, I am sure,

will be good enough to witness it. Write quickly. You need have no fear,"—to Prince Bordelacqua—"that I shall ever make use of such a paper unless I am compelled to do so in self-defence. All I wish for is to be left in peace."

When it was done and De Curtis had given him the writing, Giacinto smiled again as he had not done for many hours.

"I am most deeply obliged," he said; but none of the three returned him any answer, only that his father snorted contemptuously.

Some minutes passed before Salvatore Gozzoli came to the door and knocked on it; Fiordelisa had told him where to find it, but he had not succeeded in doing so without some little difficulty. On entering the room, he closed the door again quickly behind him, and waited for further instructions, a look of amused wonder on his face, as he produced the straps he had been ordered to bring with him.

"Fasten these gentlemen to their chairs," said Giacinto. "You had better begin with Prince Bordelacqua."

The Prince, indeed, made as though he meant to offer resistance, but, for once, the fear of his son made him submit to the operation of having his arms strapped to the chair behind him and he was powerless to move without dragging it with him.

"Now take this handkerchief and gag him with

it," directed Giacinto. "Be very careful not to hurt him, please. Afterwards you will do the same to his Highness there—only you need not be so particular for *his* comfort. I want him to feel a little pain. Signor De Curtis, though, you will treat with as little harshness as possible."

Presently, when Gozzoli had finished his task—the Duke being the only one of his patients to protest with threats and curses against the indignity inflicted upon them—he and Giacinto went very quietly into the deserted passageway. Then Giacinto locked the door and dropped the key into his coat pocket, where it clinked against the barrel of De Curtis' pistol.

"Where is everybody gone?" he asked of Gozzoli, surprised at the emptiness of the place, as they came to the staircase and saw only a single waiting-man sitting on one of the benches in the hall below.

"The house servants are almost all gone to church," said Gozzoli. "And when she came down just now Donna Fiordelisa told the gentlemen that his Highness wished them to set out at once for the hunt, so as not to lose time, and that he would join them later towards Cerese, where we passed yesterday. And so they, too, are gone."

CHAPTER XVIII

THE way had been long and wearisome by the time the three riders reached the town of Castagnaro near the River Adige, in the afternoon, after having gone round a considerable distance to avoid the outposts of a detachment of the French army of Marshal Vendôme, who had been victorious over the Austrians at Luzzara in August. Greatly to the relief of all three, they had discovered that, contrary to their expectations, the Austrians had, within the last few days, shifted their position round towards the north, nearer to the Tyrol; so that the road between Castagnaro and Treviglano, a distance of some thirty-five English miles, would be safe from all hindrance by the soldiery, although, as Gozzoli pointed out to Giacinto, they must be prepared to protect themselves against all kinds of marauders who were infesting the country in the trail of the armies.

“What is more,” he added, as they rested their horses for a while on the further bank of the river from Castagnaro, “we had better press on all we can so as to make sure of getting home as soon as possible.”

“Certainly,” said Giacinto, “but, now that we

have crossed over into the Veneto, what harm can come to us from the Duke of Mantua?"

Gozzoli smiled at his master's child-like confidence in Charles of Gonzaga's respect for territorial boundaries.

"Your pardon, Don Giacinto, but you do not yet know the Duke," he replied with a shake of the head. "We are still too close to him, here in the neighbourhood of the river. For all that I can tell he may have had us followed—and, if so, even an hour's start will not be enough to prevent some of his people from catching up with us within easy distance of the frontier, if we do not get much further into the Veneto before nightfall."

"You may be right, Salvatore," the other admitted. "Then let us push ahead. All the same, I do not believe we have anything to fear any longer except, perhaps, from thieves—and from such we ought, surely, to be able to protect ourselves!"

The countryside, new to Giacinto, was gradually assuming for Fiordelisa all the charm, the indescribable, pathetic beauty of the face of some loved person from whom she had been long parted, and who was now coming through the ruddy October afternoon to greet her again and to welcome her home. An infinite tenderness was stealing through all her being, a love beyond words, for the old familiar landscape with its dark lines of poplars, and the far-reach-

ing level of its fields, their low-lying northeastern horizon tinged, rather than crested, by the faintest possible of blue shadows, in the region of the hill-country about Este. Her home for which she had never ceased to pine would soon be in sight, and, sooner still, by a whole hour, she would be on her own land and journeying among her own people. Would they recognise her, she wondered, on first seeing her again at a distance?

Thinking thus, the memory of the morning with its momentous revelation of her husband's innocence and his father's cruel injustice towards him, together with Giacinto's own inexplicable reticence, became fainter for Fiordelisa. During a short time, therefore, while they rode on through the quiet afternoon, she gave herself up to the rapture of relief that filled her mind and heart with its healing balm in the thought that, in all human probability, she would thenceforth be left in peace with the man she had loved so steadfastly through all their separation, and in spite of all the craft and cruelty that had been employed to keep them apart forever. All that she was bitterly sorry for were those few brief moments when, worn out by bodily fatigue and by suspense prolonged unbearably, she had weakened to the verge of allowing the temptation to believe evil of Giacinto almost to carry by assault the fortress of her faith in him. Even now, as she recalled to mind her doubt-

ings, Fiordelisa's hand clenched in anger at herself; and then she broke into a smile at the thought of how Aunt Olimpia, had she but known, would have made use of the occasion to draw from it the material for a little lecture on humility and self-distrust.

By now, however, her attention was beginning to be drawn to the evidences around her of the recent presence of an army—the occasional charred remains of a camp fire, as well as scraps of rags scattered here and there over the land as the wind had lifted and flung them. Gozzoli, too, she noticed, was scanning the fields with sustained anxiety.

“What is it, Sor Salvatore?” she asked.

“Nothing much, Lady,” he answered, “but that I am still uneasy. I shall be glad when night falls and the darkness comes down to cover us.”

Of human beings, since leaving Castagnaro an hour before, they had seen none at all, the two or three farms they had passed in the distance being deserted, as if their inhabitants had either abandoned them or were still hiding there behind closed doors and windows, from Prince Eugene's Croats and Pandours. In all the wide country, indeed, so soft and mellow in the Autumn sunlight, there was no sight or sound of any living thing except now and again when the far, clear plaintive cry of a plover thrilled the warm silence or when the bird itself rose,

alarmed, from its retreat and sped away to some further place of concealment.

And so the afternoon wore away until close on sundown, when the travellers, having passed over the series of immense levels that lay between the Adige and the Frassine, drew near to a village with its church of which the portico, surmounted by an iron cross, was visible above the poplars scattered along the bank of the river. Here Gozzoli called a halt once more and suggested that they should make use of this opportunity to refresh themselves and their horses before advancing further.

“As things are, this will probably be our last chance of getting any food to-day,” he said, “and, as we have still quite a long way to go before reaching home and may have to call upon our animals for an effort, it would be wise to give them a short rest. I know this place—it is called Belseggio, and the man who keeps the inn is an acquaintance of mine.”

“Sor Salvatore is right; we can safely wait here a little,” Giacinto assured Fiordelisa, who, alone of the three, appeared uncertain as to the entire wisdom of such a proposal. Turning in her saddle, she looked back upon the now darkening plain behind them.

“I may be wrong,” she said. “There is no sign of danger anywhere. And yet, somehow, I do not like the idea of delaying——”

But, between them, the two men finally persuaded her to their way of thinking; and soon she and Giacinto were seated at a table in the inn of the place, while Gozzoli was busying himself with the horses' supper before seeing to his own. Fiordelisa, however, could not eat more than a very little, by reason of the uneasiness that was settling upon her, albeit she did her utmost to conceal it lest it might take away Giacinto's appetite. At length, though, when he had finished and was putting down the glass he had just emptied of wine, she could endure her anxiety no longer, and rose from the table almost agitatedly.

"Let us be going, dear," she entreated. "Let us be going quickly. It is nearly night, already,—and I am afraid."

"Afraid? Of what? Of whom?" he asked, as he stood up and put his arm about her waist. "We have nothing to fear from anyone any longer, dearest. Everybody about us here in the Veneto—in your own country—is our friend. What is more, I have with me a reliable weapon against any attempt of my father's to deprive me of my liberty again"—tapping his pocket—"a certain paper which will make it impossible for him to do so."

Fiordelisa did not ask what the paper might be, for her own mind was too much occupied with the

urgent need for their departure to give heed to anything else.

“Let us be going—let us be going——” she kept on saying; until he consented laughingly, and went out to give the word to Gozzoli. Left alone in the room, Fiordelisa went over to the window that was closed against mosquitoes, and stared out into the thickening nightfall, her heart now beating wildly in a rising storm of intolerable premonition.

“Be quick—be quick! Oh, why are they so slow?” she whispered frantically, as the minutes went by without the reappearance of her husband and Gozzoli with the horses in the street below.

From where she stood at the window on the upper floor of the inn Fiordelisa could see over the top of the pollards that fringed the river and beyond them for some considerable distance into the plain, although not very distinctly, owing to the darkness that was rapidly gathering all things to itself. Suddenly, something caught her eye and then held her breathless as she peered at it; something that was moving through the young night out there among the lowlands—some large animal, as it seemed at first; a strayed ox or horse, perhaps, that was coming towards the water in the intention of slaking its thirst. Gradually, she saw that it was a horse, indeed; a horse bearing a rider; and, for all that she was unable to distinguish anything of the latter be-

yond that it was a man, yet something in the uncertain outline, both of the rider and the horse, caused her knees to shake and a dreadful contraction to close her throat. So that she stood there for a time, powerless to move or to utter a sound, whilst the horseman moved along the stream, evidently seeking for a place by which to cross, until he became lost once more in the further dark towards the bridge leading over into the village.

At last, as he disappeared, and after what seemed to Fiordelisa an eternity of waiting, Giacinto came out again with Gozzoli and the horses from under the low arch of the stable-yard into the street. And, at the sight, her forces returned to her and she fell back from the window with a half-strangled cry of fear upon her lips. Leaving the room, she sped down through the house to the street and ran out to Giacinto.

“I have seen—seen someone——” she panted, taking hold of his arm as though to emphasise her words—“a man on a horse, and he is crossing the river now! Oh, why did we delay here!”

“A man on horseback? Did you see his face?” asked Giacinto. “No? But, then, how can you tell that he is following us? I think you have let yourself be frightened without cause, *carina*. And even if the man you saw were really following us, what could he do by himself against me and Salvatore?”

“ But what if there are others coming after him? ” persisted Fiordelisa, whose courage had become somewhat weakened by all that she had been through. “ Let us stay the night here in the inn, where they will not dare to attack us—and in the morning perhaps we can get word, somehow, to our own people at Trevigliano to come and help us——”

To this proposal both men demurred, however, contending that, in any case, the advantage of the darkness would be all on their side; moreover, urged Gozzoli, he knew the road, every foot of it, and their pursuers—if there were, indeed, more than one of them—must inevitably lose their way along it should they attempt to push the pursuit under cover of the night.

“ Also,” he added, as he helped the still reluctant Fiordelisa into her saddle, “ we are now in a country, Lady, where we shall not be called upon to give an account of our actions to anyone—so that we are quite ready to send to Judgment any man who dares try to hinder us.”

This he said loud enough to be heard by a handful of idlers gathered at the door of the inn and in order that they might repeat his words to all and sundry. Then he swung himself on to his horse and the riders set off again up the street in the opposite direction from the bridge by which they had entered the village an hour earlier. Not a word passed among them,

until they had left Belseggio far behind and had struck into the more broken country that succeeded to the immense alluvial plains on the western bank of the river; as before, Fiordelisa was riding in front beside Giacinto, with Gozzoli a few yards behind them. The moon had not yet risen, and the darkness was profound, so that Gozzoli spoke to Giacinto to let him pass in front that he might guide them more certainly than by directing them from the rear. And then, as he was edging his horse carefully between that of Giacinto and the wall of what was probably a vineyard, a certain very subtle sound from a considerable distance behind them, the faintest, slyest clink of metal upon metal or roadway, made him draw his breath and stop short.

“ Pst ! ” he whispered, leaning back to listen; both the others had caught the sound, too, and had checked their horses instantly, Fiordelisa with a voiceless prayer, and Giacinto with a muttered oath as he loosened one of his pistols in its holster. But, almost at once, the clinking ceased and a great stillness followed; and when Gozzoli turned his head, Giacinto saw that he looked very grave.

“ I do not like it,” he said, so low that Giacinto could scarcely hear him. “ I shall go back so as to see what it is and to give the impression that the noise of our movements is going towards the river instead of away from it. If I find that we are being

followed—well, I shall be ready with a pistol. All that you, Don Giacinto, have to do is to keep straight along this same road until you come to a rivulet and another village. That is Noventa. Go through Noventa and then bear away to your right through the woods——”

“ I know the road well from Noventa to Trevigliano,” put in Fiordelisa. “ I will undertake to guide us safely. But would it not be wiser to keep together? ”

But Gozzoli shook his head.

“ Ride on, Lady,” he said, almost sternly. “ Do not let Don Giacinto turn back to help me—his duty is to be with you—I will be at Trevigliano, please Heaven, by the morning. And so I salute you both. Now—ride! ”

And with that he backed his horse away and turned and was gone, soldier-like, without so much as one weak word of farewell in case he should not return to that other—to the woman at home for whose sake he had entered upon this desperate venture. So that Fiordelisa and Giacinto were now left to make their way to Trevigliano as best they could by themselves.

“ Come,” said Fiordelisa, “ we must be moving, dear. I know what you are thinking—that you have taken the easier part, and that you ought to have gone with Sor Salvatore. But, then, what would

have become of Fiordelisa with no one to take care of her, alone and in the dark?"

"I ought to have drawn lots for it with him," replied Giacinto with self-reproach. "I ought to have insisted on it instead of letting him sacrifice himself, perhaps, for my benefit."

Fiordelisa did not reply, but started to ride on at a canter, the utmost pace of which her tired horse was any longer capable. There comes a moment in the lives of most men when their only salvation is in a woman's apparent selfishness, and this was now the case with Giacinto, to whom his wife by her action left no choice but to follow her.

And so, on through the night, they went, Fiordelisa leading slightly, towards Noventa and the stream, their ears strained to catch what sound they could from the direction of Belseggio. Once, only, did Fiordelisa hear what sounded to her like the discharge of a firearm, but she paid no heed to it, only trusting that it might have escaped Giacinto's hearing, which was less quick than her own. But in this she was disappointed, for he had heard it as well as she.

"I must see what it is," he told her, beginning to check his horse.

"And what then of me?" she returned. And, after that, he said no more, but continued to ride on beside her.

It was still very dark when they came to the marshy edge of the rivulet by Noventa and crossed over by the bridge of planks into the sleeping village on the other side. In crossing, the din of the horses' feet resounded so loudly in the surrounding silence that Fiordelisa drew a sharp breath of apprehension lest it might signal their passage to some enemy far behind—for, since hearing the pistol-shot, her heart was heavy with the conviction that something was not as it should be, back there towards Belseggio.

The road from Noventa to Treviglano had been fairly familiar to Fiordelisa as a child, from having passed over it occasionally with her father in his coach; and, as she had told Gozzoli, she thought she knew it well. On leaving the village, therefore, she bore away to the right, Giacinto following close, along what seemed to her the well-remembered way, a wide cart-track between the trees of one of the many small chestnut woods then still scattered over the approaches to the Euganeans. All at once, as they held on at a wearied trot, the darkness turned to saffron about them; for the hunter's moon had suddenly mounted to its bed of fleecy cloud, a globe of softest golden brightness above the distant hills.

With the light there fell upon Fiordelisa a quite unexpected and very disconcerting sense of uncertainty. For her surroundings had completely lost the familiarity with which she had hitherto invested

them in her imagination so long as the darkness had endured. Now, to her dismay, she was unable to recognise a single feature of what she saw so clearly; even the Euganean hills, themselves, had an unaccustomed, inhospitable look, and the thick woodlands, through a gap in which she caught a glimpse of the moonlit summits, were like nothing she could remember to have seen before, hereabouts. Therefore, she pulled up to look about her and to consider what to do.

“Forgive me, dear,” she whispered to Giacinto—“but I am not quite sure whether I may not have made a mistake. I am almost certain that I took the right turn after we left Noventa, but somehow, I do not seem to remember this part of the road——”

What had happened was that this particular road or track was a branch of the one they ought to have kept to and from which, in the dark, they had gone aside some miles back. In Fiordelisa's childhood this in which she now found herself had not existed at all, having only come into being within the past two weeks by reason of two causes, the Austrian army's need of fuel and the constant passing and repassing of its ammunition, forage, and hospital-wagons to and from its base at Padua and Vicenza. This track, veering further and further from the other and more southerly which led, eventually, to

Treviglano, had by this time brought the pair several miles out of their right road.

"Have we lost our way, then?" asked Giacinto.

"I—I am afraid we have," Fiordelisa had to admit as she glanced about her unhappily. "The hills ought to be directly in front of us and we ought to be facing toward the very middle of them. Instead of which, they seem to me to be much too far to the south of us. We must have taken a wrong turning somewhere. What is to be done? We cannot go back for fear of—"

"There is no need to go back, *carina*. All we have to do is to make through the woods in the direction of Treviglano. Now that we have the moonlight to help us, it will not be difficult for us to find our road."

Thereupon he began to lead the way among the trees, Fiordelisa following at a walk. But, try as she would to evoke some memory of her surroundings, she could no longer find the slightest trace of them—the far-off hills excepted, and even these now wore for her an oddly unremembered aspect—anywhere in all her small store of recollections.

The minutes wore on to half an hour, more or less, as it seemed to Fiordelisa, and still she was following Giacinto in and out the wilderness of tree-trunks over the moonlit grass; when suddenly they entered a long glade or clearing with a dilapidated building

at the upper end of it—a lofty, domed summer-house, the temple, doubtless, of bygone sylvan revellings in other and more peaceful times. But the place had long since been turned to very different uses by the requirements of war, and now stood abandoned to its own desolation and to the destroying elements.

At the sight something seemed to fall away from before Fiordelisa's vision, so that she saw clearly with the eyes of her memory as well as with those of her body; and the cold and trembling that had come over her in the inn at Belseggio now returned, depriving her, for some moments, of speech, the while she stared at the lonely summer-house.

Now, indeed, she knew where she was—for the woods were her own, and the forlorn pavilion that crowned the dell was where her father had, for the last time in his life, played with her and told her stories of the fairies, as he held her on his knee one unforgettable summer's day years and years ago!—and the realisation of it struck her like an arrow in the breast, making her bow her head and wait in stricken submission for she knew not what to put her out of her pain.

And then she heard Giacinto speak her name.

“Fiordelisa, beloved—are you ill?” he asked.

At that she came back to herself and found her voice again.

“No, no, I am not ill. It is only that—that I

know this place, that I remember it. It is part of our land—the furthest part of all from home. We are now about eight miles from Trevigliano and there is no house any nearer, but—Oh, take care!—”

But the cry of warning came too late, for, even as she uttered it, the roan had already stumbled over the root of a tree and had fallen heavily, throwing Giacinto from the saddle with the force of an arbalist, so that he struck the ground with a dreadful thud and lay there motionless. Almost as quickly, Fiordelisa had slipped down from her own horse and had run to him and was bending over him, entreating him to speak to her.

Loosening his collar, she raised him to a reclining posture with his head upon her lap whilst the horses—Balthazar having regained his feet—stood quietly by, cropping the grass. Ere long Giacinto opened his eyes and smiled at his wife, and then closed them again, as though in great weariness. But when Fiordelisa saw that he was alive and even partly conscious, she cried out again—for gladness now—and, putting out all her strength, drew him towards the summer-house that opened directly on a level with the ground, although the great door of it had been taken away, leaving the interior defenceless against sun and rain.

Having succeeded in drawing Giacinto within its partial shelter, Fiordelisa placed him on his back in a

corner, and took off her riding-cloak, which she rolled up and placed under his head for a pillow. Then, remembering the need for securing the horses, she went out and fastened them to separate trees, as she had seen Gozzoli do; after which she took the pistols out of Giacinto's holsters, together with his topcoat that he had been carrying strapped to his saddle, and went back with them into the pavilion.

All prospect of reaching Treviglano that night seemed to have vanished; all that could be hoped for was that Gozzoli might find his way to the summer-house, or that—in case things had not gone well with him—no one else might do so, and that, by the morning, Giacinto might be able to complete the short remainder of their journey home. In the meantime, all that Fiordelisa could do would be to watch by him, pistol in hand, and to pray Heaven to protect them both.

Strange to say, there was still left in the pavilion a single piece of furniture out of all the splendid objects that had once adorned it; a kind of high couch this, a "day-bed" as it was called, a thing of gilding and Flemish velvet, now barely recognisable as Fiordelisa glimpsed it in the moonbeams. It yet stood where it had always stood, with the foot of it to the doorway; and she at once decided that, if possible, she would do well to get Giacinto on to it instead of letting him continue to lie on the cold tiles

of the floor. Stretching his own coat over it, therefore, in case it were damp, she set to work to try and rouse him again in order to make it easier to raise him on to the couch. By now the first results of his fall were wearing off a little, so that she had less difficulty than she had expected in effecting her purpose.

“What—what has happened to me?” he asked, weakly, opening his eyes again when she had been rubbing his temples a short while.

“You had a fall, dear—you were a little stunned. But you are better now, are you not? I want to get you on to the couch here if I can. Do you think you could help me to raise you?”

Although he did not answer, Giacinto understood what was wanted of him and lent himself, as well as he could for the sick dizziness that almost overpowered him at the least movement, to Fiordelisa’s shifting of him from the floor to the couch. When, finally between them, they had succeeded in doing so, and Fiordelisa had once more slipped her own cloak under his head for a pillow, he relapsed into a kind of semi-unconsciousness that had as much of physical and mental exhaustion in it as it had of anything else.

And so he fell asleep, and Fiordelisa, taking one of the pistols in her hand and placing the other within quick reach, sat down beside him on the old couch, her back against the wall, to keep watch until he

should be able to resume their journey—as she trusted might be the case within an hour or two. Heretofore, since his fall, she had had no time for fear; but now her terrors came back to her, multiplied a hundredfold, and her heart and brain felt numbed and frozen by them.

Never yet had she prayed as she prayed now for Giacinto and herself that they might be safely delivered out of the hands of their enemy. And never yet had that enemy seemed to her so powerful and so malevolent as now while she sat there, in the hush of the dusky, memory-haunted pavilion, staring out into the elfin dell where, but for the shadows cast by the trees, all was nearly as bright as by day.

But, by slow degrees, even Fear itself became less real to her, more blurred and confused with fragments of dream that drifted across the face of it as night-clouds wrap a stormy moon and veil its watery lustre. More than once she caught herself nodding and threw off her weariness with a frightened start; until the time came when she could not remember any longer to resist it. Her head dropped upon her breast, her fingers relaxed their hold upon the pistol that slipped down beside her on to the couch, and she was asleep.

How long she slept she could not tell, but when she awoke the moon had come round so that it

shone full into the summer-house that looked to the southwest. Fiordelisa had been disturbed by the stirring of Giacinto in his slumber, and was yet but half awake, her mind a blank—until suddenly, memory rushed back into it, filling it as with the shock of icy waters.

Her first feeling was that of thankful wonder that they were still unmolested; then she turned to glance at Giacinto, who also was now waking from the stupor of sleep that had succeeded to his fall.

“Are you better, beloved?” asked Fiordelisa. “Do you feel any pain at all?”

“Only something of a headache,” he replied, smiling his best to reassure her. With a grimace of pain he raised himself on an elbow and gazed into the night. “What can have become of Gozzoli?” he mused. “If any harm has——”

But the words died upon his lips; and Fiordelisa felt him catch her wrist sharply and saw that he was staring at some object out in the glade. Following the direction of his eyes with her own, she gave a swift gasp and snatched up his pistol from her lap.

Nor was she a second too soon; for at the same instant Anton Stürmli, having recovered from the first exulting surprise of coming thus suddenly upon his prey, drove the spurs into his jaded horse, and charged madly up the grassy incline, sword in hand, straight at the bed in the pavilion, while Fiordelisa

fumbled at the pistol in her frantic endeavour to raise the hammer of it that had become clogged with dust.

The gigantic figures of horse and rider were now in the doorway, shutting out the moonlight. The place seemed full of them and of the fell taint of sweat and saddlery, as with a clatter of slipping hoofs upon the smooth floor, the great horse reared up above the bed, twelve feet and more, into the painted gloom of the ceiling, so that all that was visible of it was the vast black barrel of its body with the wide band of girth that bound it and the murderous forefeet that fought the air before descending to crush the life out of the two on the couch.

Giacinto, who had been lying on the side furthest from that on which Stürmli had reined his horse on to its haunches, had tumbled, rather than sprung, out in the opposite direction, dragging Fiordelisa with him, a moment earlier. In the fall, the hammer of the pistol with which she was still struggling, obeyed her at last, rising and falling again almost simultaneously; there followed a prolonged roar which mingled with the crashing descent of the horse, shot through the heart, on to the couch—that broke, and splintered into fragments about the huge body as it collapsed, inert and flaccid among the wreckage.

Such was the nightmare terror of it all to Fiordelisa, the narrowness of her escape from the iron

hoofs and from the immense black carcass itself in falling—that she could only cling to Giacinto, unable even to breathe, until he had rallied his own forces sufficiently to raise himself and to draw her a little further from where the dead thing that she had killed lay upon its side with its head and fore-quarters upon the tiles, the hinder-part of it being supported by the fragments of the couch.

“Oh, my God—my God——” she whispered, and then was silent again, except for the long-drawn, shuddering sob that shook her like an aspen-leaf in the wind.

It was no time, though, as Giacinto realised, for him to comfort her; in spite of the nauseating pain that still throbbed in his head and the tremour of sickened nervousness that had seized upon him, he braced himself to respond to the demands of the situation.

“Can you stand without me for a minute, Fiorde-lisa?” he asked, his voice trembling, try as he would to control it. But she could not answer, and very gently Giacinto placed her down against the wall in the corner, where she sank with her face to it and hidden in her hands. Then, himself brushing against the wall to avoid any contact with the dead horse—through an invincible if unreasoning repugnance—he peered down at the form of Anton Stürmli that lay with it, one of his feet still in a stirrup, and the upper

part of him hanging down over the end of the couch, as quiet as if he were dead. From beneath his head, that rested on the floor, a thin stream of blood was meandering over the tiles. As Giacinto perceived, the man was completely unconscious, although still alive.

“Are there any others besides him?” Giacinto asked himself. “Any of the Duke of Mantua’s fellows?”

Stepping outside with all the caution he could muster, Giacinto looked about him, listening eagerly for several minutes, but neither saw nor heard anything, save the plunging of his own horse and Fiordelisa’s that had been frightened by the noise in the building. Having calmed them as well as he could, he went back into the pavilion and made his way over to where Fiordelisa was still crouching in the corner.

“Fiordelisa, dearest,” he said, “I believe we are safe at last.”

Then he lifted her and set her upon her feet.

“We must not forget this poor wretch here,” he went on, indicating Stürmli, “I cannot tell whether he is very badly hurt or not, and I want you to help me to do what we can for him. I am going to pull him free of the horse if I can. Meanwhile—is there any water near by? Then will you bring me some in a holster?”—as Fiordelisa, remembering the ex-

istence of a spring near by, bowed her head and tried to smile up at him.

It was not without an almost superhuman effort of strength that Giacinto succeeded in pulling Stürmli's bulk from under the horse's body that pinned it to the shattered frame of the couch. When he had done so, he laid the insensible captain of halberdiers on the floor and set to unloosening his leather collar and to bathing the wound on his head with his handkerchief and the water that Fiordelisa had drawn from the spring. Then, having bandaged the wound, he turned to Fiordelisa.

"Will you lend me your cloak to make a pillow for him?" he asked, "until we can send back for it in the morning? It has fallen down there in the corner. And now, let us be gone—it is time we were in your own house, dear—" rising and taking her by the hand.

Little more than an hour later they came in sight of the castle among the hills, that was now their home, all pale and ghostly in the moonset.

The aspen logs were flaming high in the wide fireplace of the banqueting hall in the castle of Trevigliano; nearly three months had gone by since the flight of Fiordelisa and Giacinto from Acquanera, and they were now at supper after

the Christmas midnight Mass in the Chapel of the castle.

The table at which they sat was a round one and was drawn near to the fire, for the night was cold; and besides the lady of Trevigliano and her husband there were sitting with them their Chaplain, Don Bartolomeo Prinetti and Don Cesare Bordelacqua. The latter had only reached Trevigliano that same day from Rome, with the news of his father's intention of abdicating his title and estates in favour of his eldest son and of withdrawing himself to Acquanera, there to end his days in retirement from this present world and in preparation for the next.

He had been led to this resolution, as he wrote in the letter brought by Cesare to Giacinto, by his growing conviction of the vanity of earthly things, and through a life-long devotion to the memory of the Emperor Charles V—a memory that he commended to the piety and the emulation of all young and thoughtful people. So that his beloved Giacinto was henceforth to reign in his stead as head of the House of Bordelacqua and was desired to return in that capacity to Rome as soon as he conveniently could—in order that there might be only as brief an interregnum as possible, as the writer expressed it. The letter ended with the paternal blessing and the expression of a wish that all things might be allowed to remain as nearly as might be “*in statu*

quo" in regard to Palazzo Bordelacqua and its inmates, together with an injunction to the effect that "Anton Stürmli, my late captain of halberdiers, be not in any way disturbed in his enjoyment of the pension bestowed upon him by me in compensation for disabling wounds received by him in the discharge of his duty to me."

Giacinto had just finished reading this surprising missive for the twentieth time amid the cheerful hum of talk around him, when the door opened to admit his wife's maid, Teresinella—handsome as ever, and with the smile that had become habitual to her of late—and Andrea, who had come with Don Bartolomeo from the South in response to Giacinto's invitation, a month earlier in November. Between Teresinella and Andrea was Gozzoli, his arm still in a sling as the result of his encounter with Stürmli that memorable night of October, between Belseggio and Noventa, when the Swiss had shot him off his horse, and had left him, with an arm broken at the shoulder, to make the remainder of his way home on foot whither his horse had preceded him.

The three had come to offer their congratulations to Don Giacinto on his succession to his heritage, for the news of Don Cesare's mission had already reached them through the agency of the butler.

When Giacinto, looking up from his father's let-

ter, saw who it was that entered, he understood, and, pushing back his chair, rose to his feet.

“ Let everyone fill a glass of wine for himself and drink with me to my father’s health,” he said not lightly, but very gravely, because there was no bitterness any longer in his heart towards his father, but only a great compassion and gentleness. “ May he find at Acquanera all that he is seeking—and may we all in our day and hour find it too, by God’s mercy. Amen.”

FINIS

